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# Restorative Justice as a Response to Middle School Rules Violations

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Tammy Felps

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Restorative Justice as a Response to Middle School Rules Violations

by

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MA, Walden University, 2017

MHR, University of Oklahoma, 1998

BS, Texas A & M University, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

November 2020

## Abstract

The zero-tolerance approach of discipline in schools requires the involvement of law enforcement for many violations of school rules. Schools using this approach do not have the tools for effective behavior modification, without relying on school resource officers to intervene, often resulting in juvenile criminal charges. The key elements fueling this process are exclusionary discipline practices that lead to academic failure and increased high school dropout rates. Restorative justice (RJ), a targeted reform program, is a behavior management technique that promotes desirable conditions for successful academic achievement. Many schools are using components of RJ, encounter, repair, and transform; however, implementation and effectiveness have not been researched using sufficient scientific methods to establish replicable examples. Valid population specific analysis was needed to establish the effectiveness of using RJ at the school level as an alternative to punitive and exclusionary methods. This study used a nonexperimental comparative quantitative approach to examine archival data to evaluate the efficacy of using RJ in 305 middle school environments to restore nonviolent offenders to their school communities. The results show that RJ had a significant effect on the declining suspensions for students. Social change can be achieved when the juvenile justice system and education system can work together to restore adolescents to their communities rather than to further punish or alienate them.

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## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| List of Tables .....                      | iv |
| List of Figures .....                     | v  |
| Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study..... | 1  |
| Overview of Chapter.....                  | 5  |
| Background .....                          | 5  |
| Problem Statement.....                    | 8  |
| Purpose of the Study .....                | 9  |
| Research Questions and Hypotheses .....   | 10 |
| Conceptual Framework.....                 | 11 |
| Nature of the Study .....                 | 13 |
| Definitions.....                          | 14 |
| Assumptions.....                          | 15 |
| Scope and Delimitations .....             | 16 |
| Limitations .....                         | 17 |
| Significance.....                         | 17 |
| Summary .....                             | 18 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review.....         | 20 |
| Literature Search Strategy.....           | 21 |
| Theoretical Framework.....                | 21 |
| Review of the Pertinent Literature .....  | 23 |
| Maladaptive Behavior .....                | 23 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| School Climate.....   | 24 |
| Restorative Justice and Zero-Tolerance Policies .....       | 33 |
| Race .....  | 38 |
| Outcomes of Restorative Justice Implementation.....         | 42 |
| Best Practices for Restorative Justice Implementation ..... | 46 |
| Conclusion .....  | 50 |
| Chapter 3: Research Methodology.....                        | 51 |
| Research Design and Rationale .....                         | 53 |
| Methodology .....   | 54 |
| Population .....  | 54 |
| Sampling and Sampling Procedures .....                      | 54 |
| Data Collection .....                                       | 55 |
| Operationalization.....                                     | 55 |
| Data Analysis Plan.....                                     | 57 |
| Threats to Validity .....                                   | 59 |
| Ethical Procedures .....                                    | 59 |
| Scope and Limitations.....                                  | 60 |
| Summary .....   | 61 |
| Chapter 4: Results .....                                    | 63 |
| Data Collection .....                                       | 64 |
| Results.....  | 69 |
| Hypothesis Testing for Research Question 1:.....            | 73 |



|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Hypothesis Testing for Research Question 2:.....              | 75  |
| Hypothesis Testing for Research Question 3:.....              | 76  |
| Hypothesis Testing for Research Question Four: .....          | 78  |
| Supplementary Analysis .....                                  | 79  |
| Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations ..... | 85  |
| Findings Related to the Literature.....                       | 87  |
| Interpretation of the Findings.....                           | 89  |
| Limitation of the Study .....                                 | 91  |
| Recommendations.....  | 92  |
| Implications.....   | 94  |
| Implications for Social Change.....                           | 96  |
| Conclusion .....  | 98  |
| References .....  | 100 |

## List of Tables

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Charter Versus Noncharter Schools .....                      | 64 |
| Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables.....   | 65 |
| Table 3. Suspensions, Expulsions, and Occurrences of Maladaptive Behavior by School<br>Year ..... | 66 |
| Table 4. GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ1 .....   | 74 |
| Table 5. GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ1 .....   | 74 |
| Table 6. GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ2 .....   | 75 |
| Table 7. GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ2 .....   | 76 |
| Table 8. GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ3 .....   | 77 |
| Table 9. GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ3 .....   | 77 |
| Table 10. GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ4.....   | 78 |
| Table 11. GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ4.....   | 79 |
| Table 12. Juvenile Delinquent Arrests Descriptive Statistics .....                                | 80 |
| Table 13. Juvenile Delinquent Arrests Pre- and Post-RJ Implementation.....                        | 80 |
| Table 14. Independent Samples Test .....  | 81 |
| Table 15. Felony Arrests Descriptive Statistics .....   | 81 |
| Table 16. Felony Arrests Pre- and Post-RJ Implementation.....                                     | 82 |
| Table 17. Independent Samples Test .....  | 82 |

## List of Figures

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Figure 1. Bar graph representing mean in-school suspension percentages from 2014 to 2019.....      | 67 |
| Figure 2. Bar graph representing mean out-of-school suspension percentages from 2014 to 2019 ..... | 68 |
| Figure 3. Bar graph representing mean expulsion percentages from 2014 to 2019 .....                | 68 |
| Figure 4. Bar graph representing mean maladaptive behavior percentages from 2014 to 2019.....      | 69 |
| Figure 5. Juvenile delinquent arrests since 1999 .....   | 71 |
| Figure 6. Felony arrests since 1999 .....  | 72 |

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In addition to the task of educating students, schools are responsible for managing behaviors, teaching social skills, and ensuring the safety of students and staff.

Maladaptive behaviors in some students can be disruptive to a school's learning environment, making it difficult for teachers to function effectively and affecting the academic success of other students (Ullman, 2016). According to Cobb (2009), school discipline policies historically were focused on providing a safe environment for students and staff, preserving the decorum of the school, and building character and accountability in young people. However, juvenile accountability models that include a police presence in schools mirror societal standards for regulating adult conduct, often including more law enforcement involvement and fewer behavior reformation programs, resulting in a prison-like environment for some students (Cobb, 2009). These methods of addressing behaviors are punitive in nature, and stigmatize students in a way that alienates them from their peers and communities (Wald & Losen, 2003).

School administrators put standardized policies in place to address student behaviors that negatively affect the learning environment. In response to increasing numbers and severities of undesirable behaviors, school discipline turned to a zero-tolerance policy in most states (Wald & Losen, 2003). Zero-tolerance describes a policy of discipline that determines the categories of behaviors that a student is to be automatically suspended or expelled from school if engaging in it (Black, 2014). In 1994, this exclusionary approach to discipline was established based on the federal law known as the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) that mandated expulsion of any student

from school for possession of a firearm on school property (Barrett & Brooks, 2017). The expansion from the GFSA to a zero-tolerance policy has led to increased numbers of students being suspended or expelled from school, a police presence in schools, and enactment of new laws to punish school rule violations (Wald & Losen, 2003). The zero-tolerance approach requires the involvement of law enforcement for many violations of school rules previously managed by school administrators (Schiff, 2013). Harsher punishments for students have included removal from school, legal action, and introduction into the juvenile criminal justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). This shift from classroom to courtroom has been termed the school-to-prison pipeline (SPP) because many juvenile offenders continue into the adult justice system (Cobb 2009; Wald & Losen, 2003). This process leads to the conclusion that schools do not have the tools or resources for effective behavior modification, so they rely on school resource officers to intervene, often resulting in juvenile criminal charges (Wald & Losen, 2003).

The SPP is defined as the process of referring students to juvenile court for behavioral infractions. The SPP pushes students out of school and into the criminal justice system, often in racially disproportionate numbers (Cobb, 2009). The key elements fueling this process are exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, that leads to academic failure and increased high school dropout rates (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Schiff, 2013). Adult prisons are filled with individuals who have traveled through the juvenile justice system into the adult criminal justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). Approximately 68% of state prison inmates in 1997 had not completed high school, and 75% of inmates under the age 18 years

sentenced to adult prisons had not passed the 10th grade (Wald & Losen, 2003). Rampey et al. (2016) indicated that 30% of the 1,547 individuals who composed the sample of federal, state, and private prison inmates within the United States had less than a high school education compared with only 14% in U.S. households. Individuals who are removed from the education system are more likely to continue maladaptive behaviors, including dropping out of school and criminal violations of societal expectations and norms, according to this author.

Discipline reforms are widely varied and implemented by program-based interventions or policy changes at differing levels. Some reforms are at the state or district level, while others are at a school level or target individuals or groups of students (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017). Schools that have supportive leadership, schoolwide behavior management, and effective academic instruction minimize risks for the occurrence of delinquency and maladaptive behaviors (Christle et al., 2005). One targeted reform program, known as restorative justice (RJ) is a behavior management technique that promotes desirable conditions for successful academic achievements (Christle et al., 2005).

Schools need to manage maladaptive behaviors in order to provide successful learning environments for all students. RJ is a method for using participatory learning and decision-making for realigning delinquent behaviors with more adaptive behaviors to promote effective communication, positive socialization, accountability, and the safety of students and staff (Wachtel, 2013). This response method deters premature referral of nonviolent students to the juvenile courts, thus reducing the probability of future

involvement in the adult prison system (Cobb, 2009). RJ is a process of allowing primary stakeholders, including victims, offenders, schools, and communities, to determine how to repair the harm caused by the offensive behavior (Wachtel, 2013). Realigning all stakeholders toward establishing a common goal may help to restore relationships and keep juveniles in the community.

RJ addresses the needs of victims, schools, communities, and the roles of the offenders. RJ contrasts with the legalistic system of rehabilitation or retribution that holds offenders accountable in relation to violations of rules or laws for the purpose of punishment (Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005; Zehr, 2015). School-based RJ is an approach to discipline that engages all stakeholders affected by the issue or behavior in determining the best resolution to the situation (Gonzalez, 2012). Juvenile justice was modeled on the premise of rehabilitation of youth but does not seem to have a process for teaching adaptive behaviors to restore relationships (Gonzalez, 2012).

RJ provides a framework for reducing student suspensions and expulsions stemming from maladaptive behaviors. Restorative programs are more effective responses to criminal behavior than traditional approaches in the areas of victim and offender satisfaction, restitution compliance, and recidivism (Latimer et al., 2005). However, there is an absence of recent and comprehensive evaluations of such programs in school settings that can provide an opportunity for researchers to focus on the effects of restorative programs (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). RJ techniques can provide students with an opportunity to describe their experiences, gain empathy for peers, and take accountability for their actions (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

## **Overview of Chapter**

Chapter 1 includes further support for the examination of RJ. The background and problem statement sections provide historical context regarding behavior management programs that led to the increased need for the use of RJ to remediate the SPP aspect of the education system and improve outcomes for all students (Cobb, 2009; Latimer et al., 2005). In this chapter, I discuss the research questions, research methodology, target population, and variables. Following this section are discussions of the theoretical and conceptual framework, the nature of the study, operational definitions, assumptions, scope, and delimitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, the significance of the study, and a summary of the chapter.

## **Background**

A clear school structure, transparent policies, and perceived equality can decrease the need for harsh punitive responses to nonviolent behaviors. Christle et al. (2005) suggested that supportive leadership, dedicated and collegial staff, schoolwide behavior management, and effective academic instruction can minimize risks for youth delinquency. Cobb (2009) concluded that there is a need to shift away from one-size-fits-all school discipline tactics and implement procedural protections for children otherwise faced with referral to the court system. Cobb (2009) suggested that these actions would provide safeguards against the premature referral of nonviolent students to the juvenile courts and also reduce the probability of their future exposure to the adult criminal justice system. Schiff (2013) supported the shift away from the zero-tolerance policy of schools



and suggested RJ as an alternative to punitive actions. Pereda Beltrán (2015) determined that RJ can benefit children by supporting the participation of youths in the system. Austin (2018) concluded that a cultural shift is warranted to address the needs of vulnerable youth by increasing access to academic services and resources and promoting opportunities for social change. Latimer et al. (2005) described recidivism and restitution compliance components of RJ as the most quantifiable measures of the effectiveness of RJ. Compared to nonrestorative practices, RJ has been found to be effective at increasing victim satisfaction through inclusion in the process, offender satisfaction through nonpunitive alternatives, and restitution compliance for accountability, while decreasing recidivism of offenders.

RJ is an empathetic philosophy that focuses on reducing harm in relationships caused by misbehavior rather than punishment that seeks to stop misbehavior through feelings of powerlessness and an ongoing cycle of harm (Mullet, 2014). The aim of RJ is to avoid retributive responses and repair the relationship between the offender, victim, and community (Armour 2012). Cornell, Shukla, and Konold (2015) examined the role of an authoritative school climate and peer victimization in relation to that school climate. The features of school climate studied were disciplinary structure and student support. Multilevel multivariate modeling in a statewide sample of 39,364 middle school students attending 423 schools revealed that a greater disciplinary structure was associated with lower levels of prevalence of teasing and bullying, bullying victimization, and general victimization. Greater student support was also shown to be associated with lower levels of teasing, bullying, and general victimization (Cornell et al., 2015). School climate and

structure affect the prevalence of harmful and maladaptive student behaviors (Cornell et al. 2015).

Hurley, Guckenburg, Persson, Fronius, and Petrosino (2015) conducted preliminary research about the successes and challenges of implementing restorative practices to address student misbehavior in public schools. Nearly all of the participants interviewed encouraged future research studies to refine the framework and determine outcomes of RJ on schools (Hurley et al., 2015). Although restorative practice principles are being taught in some schools, juvenile justice systems, and community programs, the essential components, have not always been used effectively (Frias-Armentia, Rodríguez-Macías, Corral-Verdugo, Caso-Niebla, & García-Arizmendi, 2018). Support for RJ programs is growing, but there is still a lack of internally valid research to attribute positive educational outcomes to the implementation of RJ (Fronius et al., 2019). There is an absence of literature concerning the efficacy of RJ in response to nonviolent school rules violations in the middle school environment. The current study would be helpful for better understanding of the effects of RJ in the place of exclusionary discipline practices and effectiveness of decreasing repetitive maladaptive behaviors, specifically nonviolent rules violations. The results could provide policy makers, district leaders, school boards, and school administrators an overview of the effectiveness of RJ as a collaborative behavior management program in order to minimize the effects of law enforcement and the juvenile court system in the handling of student misbehavior, specifically in the middle school environment.

### **Problem Statement**

It is not fully understood to what extent RJ may improve outcomes for students involved in nonviolent middle school rules violations. Many schools, communities, and programs are using components of RJ; however, implementation and effectiveness have not been researched using sufficient scientific methods to establish replicable examples (Fronius et al., 2019). The current literature on RJ has primarily focused on the adult criminal justice system and how RJ has been beneficial for victim satisfaction and affected offender recidivism (Latimer et al., 2005). There is limited scientific literature examining the effects of RJ on victim satisfaction, offender accountability, school environment, and community involvement (Hurley et al., 2015). Research about RJ is ongoing in several areas; however, valid population specific analysis is needed to establish the effectiveness of using restorative practices at the middle school level as an alternative to punitive and exclusionary methods and to decrease maladaptive behavior rates.

The results of the proposed study could lead to future scrutiny of restorative practices. Future studies may determine whether schools are using RJ with fidelity, should this study show that RJ does not improve outcomes for nonviolent middle school students who have committed rules violations (Frias-Armentia et al., 2018). Future research may determine which practices are effective, what determines a school's readiness to implement RJ, and what training and professional development is needed if RJ is shown to have a positive effect on the outcomes of these students (Fronius et al., 2019). Restorative programs aim to remedy the consequences of zero-tolerance policies

that led to the SPP by decreasing the number of students referred to the juvenile court systems, especially for nonviolent offenses (Mullet, 2014; Pereda Beltrán, 2015; Schiff, 2013). However, there is a limited amount of recent, comprehensive evaluations of such programs that have enabled researchers to focus specifically on the effects of restorative programs (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to use a quantitative approach to examine archival data pertaining to the efficacy of using RJ, specifically in middle school environments, for the reduction of exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. These discipline practices include in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. Children were previously removed from the classroom as punishment for nonviolent behaviors, resulting in their missing valuable academic time and instruction, further hindering their educational progress. There is a lack of empirical research regarding the effects of RJ in all levels of education when adopted as a school philosophy as a preferred response to conflict (Katic, 2017). The independent variable is the use of RJ, and the dependent variables are in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and repetitive occurrences of undesirable behaviors. This examination will determine the effectiveness of RJ in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices and decreasing repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The research questions and associated hypotheses address the problem to be explored in this study, that of understanding the effects of RJ on reducing exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors.

RQ1: Is there a significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_01$ : There is no significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_a1$ : There is a significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

RQ2: Is there a significant decrease of out of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_02$ : There is no significant decrease of out-of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_a2$ : There is a significant decrease of out-of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

RQ3: Is there a significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_03$ : There is no significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_a3$ : There is a significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

RQ4: Is there a significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_04$ : There is no significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_a4$ : There is a significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The main concepts of RJ are encounter, reparative, and transformative (Maglione, 2016). The encounter can be described as the communicative channel and interpersonal relationships between stakeholders. The key needs of the participants are to express and address emotion, gain a moment of mutual understanding and convergence of interests (encounter), right the wrong (reparative), and transform themselves, their relationships, and their mindsets (transformative) through accountability (Maglione, 2016). One advocate of the use of restorative practices is the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP). The IIRP promotes a program of repairing harm and building stronger communities through a specific set of methods (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009).

Although many schools are currently using the IIRP methods of restorative practices to implement change, quantitative measures are still needed to study the results of these methods (Costello et al., 2009). Maxwell (2013) explained that the system of

concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that informs any research is a key component of the study design. Strengths that have been identified using this concept for the current topic include improved school climate, accountability and empathy to conflict through improved mutual understanding and communication, and understanding social expectations (Winkler, Walsh, de Blois, Maré, & Carvajal, 2017). The restorative path to change is described as social discipline where individuals are given high levels of support and encouragement along with high levels of pressure or expectations of behavior (Costello et al., 2009; Wachtel, 2013). This method is used to bring about change with the individual rather than by doing things for them or to them (Wachtel, 2013).

RJ is a way for offenders to understand the pain of the harm that was done, address feelings of guilt, and reconcile with the victim or victim's family (Palermo, 2013). Engaging in this process will help the offender assume accountability with the aid of their family and community. By removing the labels of offender and victim in the transformative stage for nonviolent offences, the use of RJ is expected to improve school environments and trust within families and communities that schools effectively provide a safe and fair learning environment, create a sense of accountability within all students to prepare them to become effective global citizens, and decrease the likelihood of repeat offenses or transition into more serious criminal offenses. A decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors would lead to a lower rate of exclusionary discipline, and ultimately a lower level of juvenile institutionalization.

### **Nature of the Study**

This nonexperimental comparative study will examine the effectiveness of RJ practices in middle schools for youthful offenders in the areas of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors in the school environment. In this study, I aimed to explore the relationship between the independent variable, implementation of RJ practices, and the dependent variables, as it pertains to the need for the application of different interventions for middle school youthful offenders. The relationship between variables was evaluated using archival data.

The intention behind this research project is to use real world data that has already been collected by communities that have recognized a need for change in the zero-tolerance policy and looked for other means of addressing school rules violations. A compelling advocate of RJ is a juvenile court judge in Clayton County, Georgia. Clayton County has been collecting data in conjunction with the school district for the past few years in terms of school discipline, rules violations, school climate, juvenile arrests, diversion from prosecution to a restorative program, and entering the juvenile justice system. Data are collected regarding the involvement of all stakeholders in the use of RJ and were analyzed for this study.

In this study, I used use archival data to look at the significance of the original problem in a sample population, of middle school aged children, in the areas of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and repetition of maladaptive behaviors in response to nonviolent rules violations. Archival data collected by the



Clayton County juvenile court and school district were analyzed using appropriate measures and methods. That data will then be compared with data from a sample of students in the same middle school system and climate, using the same criteria, who experienced RJ. Other available relevant archival juvenile justice data compiled by the RAND Corporation with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice Comprehensive School Safety Initiative may be used to supplement the Clayton County data.

### **Definitions**

*Exclusionary discipline:* Discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion that remove a student from the classroom for a set amount of time (Gagnon, Jaffee, & Kennedy, 2016).

*Expulsion:* The permanent removal of a student from school as a result of violence or repetitive nonviolent infractions (Allman & Slate, 2011).

*In-school suspension:* The removal of a student from their usual class into an alternative classroom with restrictions (Allman & Slate, 2011).

*Juveniles:* A person who has not reached the age of 18 (United States Department of Justice, n.d.).

*Maladaptive behaviors:* Behavior that interferes with an individual's ability to adjust to and participate in particular settings (Gray, 2013).

*Nonviolent offense:* An offense that does not harm another person or damages property, such as getting out of seat without permission (Fenning & Jenkins, 2018).

*Out-of-school suspension:* The removal of a student from school for a set duration

in response to rules violations (Allman & Slate, 2011).

*Restorative justice (RJ)*: A method for realigning delinquent behaviors with more adaptive behaviors in order to promote effective communication and accountability and ensure the safety of students and staff (Wachtel, 2013).

*School-to-prison pipeline (SPP)*: The process of referring students to juvenile court for behavioral infractions, thus pushing students out of school and into the criminal justice system (Cobb, 2009).

*Zero-tolerance policies*: Policies of school discipline that determine categories of behaviors that will result in students being suspended or expelled from school (Black, 2014).

### **Assumptions**

An assumption of this study is that the archival data kept by the Clayton County juvenile courts is thorough, accurate, and provides complete information. It is also assumed that discipline records concerning in-school and out-of-school suspensions are publicly available and accurate. The results of this study hinge upon the forthright record-keeping practices of Clayton County schools and juvenile courts in order to provide an accurate representation of the effects of RJ practices. For schools that use RJ as a discipline philosophy, it is assumed that it is practiced with fidelity. An assumption regarding RJ is that the use of RJ practices can help to disincentivize juveniles who move from school rules violations to criminal charges (Schiff, 2013).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

As RJ is meant to be a countermeasure for zero-tolerance policies, one of its goals is to reduce exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behavior. In this study, I examined the exclusionary discipline practices of in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. In-school suspensions are common practices that remove the student from the classroom to an alternate classroom, but keep them in school for the sake of reducing out-of-school suspensions (Ullman, 2016). The restrictions placed on students in the alternative classroom are to some extent similar to that of juvenile detention and therefore prison. Although not completely removed from peers, a student in in-school suspension is isolated and grouped with other students who have violated rules. Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions are medium and extreme level responses to maladaptive behaviors that isolate a student from their primary source of peer-to-peer social interactions and school community. Repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors may lead to any of these exclusionary discipline practices.

Delimitations of this study were focused on demographics of Clayton County. To be able to generalize the findings, this study has to ensure that all racial and socioeconomic populations are evenly accounted for. This study will not account for the exclusionary practice of alternative placements such as alternative school, or out-of-school suspensions that require a student to attend an off-campus location to complete assignments, rather than at-home suspension.

### **Limitations**

The use of archival data and nonexperimental design limits the amount and types of data that are available, based on what was originally collected. The comparative design can only draw a conclusion about a statistically significant relationship, rather than a cause and effect association. It also does not allow for an in-depth look at the fidelity of RJ practices within schools or aspects of RJ such as victim satisfaction, offender accountability, and other phenomena that the philosophy aims to improve upon. Ultimately, this study is limited to exclusionary practices and repetitive occurrences.

### **Significance**

The focus of RJ is repairing the relationship between individuals, schools, families, and communities. The proposed study will evaluate the efficacy of using restorative practices in middle school environments to restore nonviolent minor offenders to their school communities by reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices. The use of RJ practices can help mitigate the frequency of juvenile criminal charges (Schiff, 2013). Before its use, school discipline had turned to a zero-tolerance approach that required the involvement of law enforcement for many maladaptive behaviors and minor violations of school rules.

Key elements in the shift from educational to criminal behavior are academic failure, exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions and expulsion, and eventual dropping out of school (Christle et al., 2005; Schiff, 2013). RJ is a method to ensure the safety of students and staff while decreasing premature referral of nonviolent students to the juvenile courts, thus reducing the probability of future involvement in the adult prison

system (Cobb, 2009). School-based RJ is an approach to discipline that engages all parties affected by the issue or behavior in determining the best resolution (Gonzalez, 2012). Continued research may show that restorative programs are more effective than traditional approaches to juvenile criminal behavior under some circumstances (Latimer et al., 2005). The focus of school-based RJ is repairing the relationship between individuals, schools, and communities (Christle et al., 2005; Schiff, 2013). This study will contribute to the research regarding the effects of RJ on the middle school level of education when adopted as a school philosophy as a preferred response to conflict.

### **Summary**

RJ is a philosophy that is increasingly being used to combat the effects of zero-tolerance policies (Cobb, 2009). The identified problem is to develop an understanding as to what extent the policy of RJ affects the exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors when implemented as a response to nonviolent middle school rules violations. Based on previous RJ studies and the limited studies on middle school environments, four elements of the problem have been identified, as well as subsequent research questions and hypotheses, to understand the effect of RJ on the use of exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors in middle school students. The four factors under examination are in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. Using a causal comparative design, to seek to find the relationship between the independent and dependent variables after an event has already

occurred (Johnson & Christensen, 2014), is the most appropriate strategy for addressing the four elements of the problem based on the method of sampling.

In Chapter 2, the introduction section is followed by discussions on search techniques used for finding empirical studies associated with different areas of the proposed study. Discussions also include the conceptual model used for conducting the proposed study and examining effects regarding exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. The literature review section provides an in-depth discussion of the discipline practices and past findings of RJ studies. Finally, discussions regarding the independent variable and any existing relationship with the dependent variables form the basis for the rest of the literature review. Synthesis of any existing studies becomes helpful when examining the relationships among the proposed study variables.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Maladaptive behavior presents a significant problem to the operation of schools and the success of students who demonstrate such behavior. Such behavior is disruptive to the learning environment for all students (Ullman, 2016). In past years, zero-tolerance responses have led to an increasing number of individuals being either suspended or expelled from school (Wald & Losen, 2003). Exclusionary discipline approaches have led to an increasing level of involvement of law enforcement in school proceedings. Tactics related to zero-tolerance policies resulted in ongoing legal action against students and the isolation of students from their communities, decreasing their opportunity for obtaining an education (Wald & Losen, 2003). One response has been the use of RJ that takes a less harsh approach to student offenses and attempts to reintegrate offenders with their community (Ullman, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of using a RJ approach to addressing middle school age students who commit nonviolent offenses at their school. The research can be useful because it comes during a post zero-tolerance era during that researchers are examining whether there are more effective ways of addressing offenses in schools. Researchers have previously indicated that removing children from the classroom as a punishment results in the student missing crucial time learning and potentially hindering their educational progress (Katic, 2017).

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature primarily on the effect of maladaptive behavior on the school environment when RJ is the policy. Elements of RJ that are explored in the literature review include its effect on race, outcomes that result from

applying RJ, and the general practices associated with RJ. This literature briefly traces the history of RJ prior to exploring its application.

The goal of this study is to examine the influence of RJ on middle school age students who committed nonviolent offenses. Chapter 2 is organized as follows to address the research question: literature search strategy, theoretical foundation, and literature related to key variables and concepts. Finally, I summarize the chapter before transitioning to the next chapter.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The following online databases were searched while gathering literature for the review: Google Scholar, National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Oxford Academic, SAGE journals, Springer Link, Taylor and Francis, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). Keywords and terms were developed to guide the research and included *restorative justice*, *restorative justice and race*, *restorative justice and grade*, *restorative justice in schools*, *restorative justice practices*, and *restorative justice outcomes*. The literature review consisted primarily of peer-reviewed journal articles. Also included in the review are papers, books, and dissertations, with materials primarily collected from between the years 2015 and 2019.

### **Theoretical Framework**

RJ is an alternative means of dealing with delinquent behavior that shifts the emphasis away from punitive measures and toward promoting improved behavior and retention of the student within the school. Wachtel (2013) characterized RJ as a means of improving communication and accountability that consequently led to increased safety



for both students and staff. This approach to justice involves integrating multiple stakeholder into the justice process.

The process of RJ requires that the victim and offender communicate together in conjunction with the surrounding community to establish a means of understanding and addressing the harm done (Watchel, 2013). This approach allows for the proposal of different ideas that all stakeholders can agree on in order to address the harm. RJ is deemed to be desirable because it may prove to help meet the needs of all stakeholders involved (Zehr, 2015). From the individual to the community level, all stakeholders would have their concerns addressed using this approach.

RJ is a broad term that is characterized by numerous practices meant to interrupt standard practices that were typically heavy on punitive measures. RJ has in the past been used to divert individuals away from referral into the justice system (Fronius et al., 2019). It has been employed in the past not only to prevent entry into the adult justice system but also as a program implemented among individuals in the juvenile justice system. As such, RJ can be beneficial not only as a preventative measure to keep people from entering the criminal justice system, but also as a means of addressing those individuals who are already in the justice system. Within the school system, RJ requires the training of staff to use restorative practices to respond to ongoing conflicts in the school environment. However, given the diversity of RJ practices, it is difficult to find consistent definitions of what such justice means. These programs are often focused on improved restorative dialogues, conferencing between stakeholders, within-school efforts to improve climate and reduce punitive responses, and the use of restorative circles. Such

efforts are all designed to improve the climate of a school and eliminate referrals into the criminal justice system for nonviolent rules violations.

### **Review of the Pertinent Literature**

#### **Maladaptive Behavior**

Maladaptive behavior can be a disruptive force, leading to poor academic outcomes in schools. Ullman (2016) indicated that such behaviors threaten the learning environment. Not only do such behaviors negatively affect the student who engages in the maladaptive behavior, but behaviors also negatively affect those around the student, and lower outcomes for all students in the classroom. As such, schools have made attempts to improve school discipline and safety.

Disruptive behavior creates several negative outcomes for students. Ford (2015) noted that disruptive behavior in the classroom negatively affects learning and interferes with a student's education. This disruption is harmful to students, educators, and the class as a whole. Teachers often cite disruptive behavior as among the most difficult problems that they are faced with and increasing numbers of children in classrooms are reported to have behavioral problems. This is sometimes due to emotional and behavioral disorders. Researchers sometimes attribute disruptive behaviors to a number of behavior disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder. With so many potential causes for disruptive behavior, increasing attention has been paid to establishing a means of breaking the cycle of disruptive behavior. When children displace their emotions, they direct aggressive and

destructive behaviors outward, negatively affecting the classroom. Researchers are increasingly interested in developing methods of countering these negative behaviors.

Kristoffersen, Krægpøth, Nielsen, and Simonsen (2015) indicated that an influx of difficult students had a negative effect on the learning environment. In such circumstances, the peers of these students experienced lowered academic achievement, with a decline in academic performance of up to 2.3%. Although modest, the effect size was still significant, indicating that efforts should be made to mitigate against the disruptive learning environments at school. The effect was most pronounced when incoming children had a psychiatric diagnosis, presenting at least one warning sign for schools to be attentive toward in new students.

Disruptive students can negatively affect their respective academic success as well as the academic success of peers within the same classroom (Ford, 2015). When students within a classroom misbehave learning may be interrupted as educators struggle to maintain order (Ford, 2015).

### **School Climate**

*School climate* can be defined as a collection of factors intrinsic to the educational setting (Shukla et al., 2016). School climate is often multifaceted and includes student behavior and support, leadership, and extracurricular activity. However, school climate perceptions vary according to the individual (Shukla et al., 2016). Results of Shukla et al. (2016), indicated that perceptions of school climate were not homogenous.

Kutyuruba et al. (2015) performed a systematic review of existing literature and found that school support and connections with teachers were important to the emotional

health of students. Peer relationships were important influences on the sort of behaviors that students engaged in (Kutyuruba et al., 2015). The creation of school climate was tied to leadership, who set the tone for the organizations. Leadership helped set the vision for their schools, so increasing positive perceptions of teachers and leadership, may help to improve perceptions of overall climate and safety leading to improved academic outcomes (Kutyuruba et al., 2015).

Support can also be found in the form of parental involvement. Researchers suggested that family participation could be discouraged when the appropriate programs were not implemented (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Due to the diversion of funds to other parts of a school's operation, programs in schools often focus on educational purposes without addressing school climate. However, researchers indicated that increased attention should be paid toward nurturing improved relationships between students' parents and the overall school system (Berkowitz et al., 2017). By doing so, it may be possible to improve academic outcomes, specifically among students from a low socioeconomic background (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Researchers also pointed to the need to assess the neighborhood where a school is located, so that specific school needs can be identified. From these needs, tailored programs could be created to address problems and benefit students from poor socioeconomic neighborhoods (Berkowitz et al., 2017).

In at least one case, school psychological climate was not directly linked to academic achievement but was mediated by self-efficacy beliefs. Høigaard, Kovač, Øverby, and Haugen (2015) drew on a sample of 482 9<sup>th</sup>- and 10<sup>th</sup>-grade Norwegian

students and collected data through the use of a questionnaire designed to assess multiple outcomes. Discussing their findings, Høigaard et al. (2015) indicated that perceptions of a school as being task oriented was associated with higher academic achievement, whereas perceptions that a school was ability oriented was associated with poorer outcomes. Task-oriented schools with strong supportive learning environments produced superior academic results.

The benefits of promoting a positive school climate include improved mental and emotional wellbeing (Lester and Cross, 2015). Lester and Cross (2015) indicated that the transition from primary to secondary school was a particularly difficult period when stress may have negative mental outcomes among students, typically those between the ages of 11 and 12 years old. Researchers indicated that when students felt less connected to their school environment or less safe in their schools, they were more likely to have poor mental wellbeing (Lester and Cross, 2015). Feeling safe at school was the strongest protective factor for students who already entered their first year of secondary school. Finally, peer support was the strongest protective factor for mental wellbeing among students in their second year of secondary school (Lester & Cross, 2015).

**Student Behavior and Climate.** Student behavior affects the overall school climate, and school climate is tied to the academic achievement of students. Shukla, Konold, and Cornell (2016) investigated school climate, including information from 47,631 high school students and their ratings of school climate across 323 schools. These ratings included topics such as disciplinary structure and bullying victimization. Following analysis of the data, the researchers found that there were different student

profile types associated with varying types of school climate. Probing of the data revealed that perceptions of school climate were not homogenous across a student body. Those who rated schools higher in areas such as willingness to seek help or academic achievement were more likely to rate bullying as low. Generally, high engagement among students was linked to superior academic outcomes, and a fair discipline structure with adequate support systems encouraged help-seeking behaviors and a reduction in bullying. However, 31% of the sample that formed the largest group of responders, indicated that they experienced high levels of teasing and bullying. Such a high percentage indicated that bullying was a reoccurring phenomenon that occurred within social groups to such a degree that it needs to be addressed (Shukla et al., 2016).

Similar research indicated that a positive school climate was associated with positive outcomes. O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw, and Eklund (2015) noted that positive school climate was often associated with desirable academic outcomes, and positive social and emotional outcomes for the students attending the school. The researchers examined the effect of school climate as a moderator between family structure and academic performance. The researchers drew data from among 490,000 students across 902 California public high schools, with students participating in the study having been drawn from between Grades 9 through 11. The data indicated that regardless of what sort of family structure was in place, students who perceived a positive school climate were those who were most likely to self-report a higher GPA. Across multiple family structures, including one parent or homeless family structures, perceptions of positive school climate were repeatedly linked with improved GPA self-reporting. This effect

was most strongly present within homeless youth and among youth from one parent homes. Such findings suggest that improving school climate could be critical for the most vulnerable students studied.

Efforts to improve school climate may similarly affect student, staff, and administrators. Researchers noted that there was a weak correlation in perceptions of school climate among all three groups (Gase et al., 2018). The researchers drew data from 121 schools in Los Angeles County and based their findings on five dimensions of student wellbeing that included (a) depressive symptoms/suicidal ideation, (b) tobacco use, (c) alcohol use, (d) marijuana use, and (e) grades. Following data analysis, the researchers concluded not only that perceptions of school climate were weakly correlated among stakeholders, but that there was a strong association between student achievement and reports of both school safety and engagement. The findings indicated the importance of creating a positive school climate where bullying and victimization were minimized in order to produce desired academic outcomes.

Researchers have warned against assuming causality in the relationship between positive school climate and improved academic outcomes. Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, and Benbenishty (2017) performed a comprehensive review of the literature available up to the year 2000. The conclusion of their study was that positive school climate was found to mitigate against the negative outcomes associated with students coming from a low socioeconomic status.

The finding that RJ fostered a positive school climate complements the assertion by O'Malley et al. (2015) that individuals from a homeless background benefited

strongly from a positive school climate. Berkowitz et al. (2017) went on to say that their second finding indicated that there was no strong causal relationship between positive climate and improved academic achievement. As such, the researchers warned against the assumption that improvements to school climate alone would result in improved academic outcomes and instead suggested that further research was necessary to clarify the relationship.

Although the perception of overall school climate is largely a subjective measure, such negative and positive factors may influence student experience within the classroom (Gase et al., 2018). The way that a student perceives their respective learning environment may influence academic outcomes (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Factors that may influence students positively include perception of RJ, classroom order, and feelings of closeness within the school (Berkowitz et al. 2017). Conversely, students may be negatively affected by bullying, teasing, and harsh discipline from educators (O'Malley et al., 2015).

As both positive and negative factors can affect students' perception of school climate, understanding how such influential factors originate is vital to understanding how students interpret respective learning environments (O'Malley et al., 2015). Factors that may influence the creation of school climate include school leadership approach, the availability of extracurricular activities to students, safety, and the implementation of zero-tolerance policies for student misbehavior.

**Leadership approach and school climate.** Taking an authoritarian leadership approach to school climate may produce improved results in academic outcomes. An



authoritarian leadership approach within an educational setting is one that students do not influence classroom or school policies or goals. In this way, students are largely ignored within much of decisions-making processes even though students are directly affected by results (Shukla et al., 2016).

Cornell et al, (2016) surveyed 39,364 students in the seventh and eighth grades and another 48,027 students in the ninth and 12th grades. Students were drawn from across 323 high schools. Following an analysis of the data, the researchers concluded that authoritative school climates were conducive to producing improved academic outcomes in both middle and high schools. These findings were consistent with authoritative school climate theory. This type of school climate was characterized by a strong disciplinary structure that provided student support. The disciplinary structure included within this context was typically perceived as strongly enforced but also fair to all participants. Student support, as defined by Cornell et al (2016), referred to perceptions that teachers and other members of staff were supportive of student success.

These findings are consistent with separate research by Shukla et al. (2016) suggesting that fair disciplinary systems are associated with positive academic outcomes. In addition, the finding that social support is associated with positive outcomes is consistent with the finding by Bohmert, Duwe, and Hipple (2016) as mitigating against recidivism. Consequently, the findings of Cornell et al. (2016) are consistent with the general literature and indicate the academic benefits of a strong, fair disciplinary system and strong social supports. An exploration of multi-tiered systems of support indicated

that there was a positive relationship between implementing these systems and positive outcomes in behavior and attendance at the high school level (Freeman et al., 2016).

**Extracurricular activities and school climate.** Extracurricular activities were also associated with improved perceptions of school climate. Martinez, Coker, McMahon, Cohen, and Thapa (2016) indicated that extracurricular activities improved school engagement and academic success. Participation in sports, clubs, and art activities were all associated with multiple positive outcomes, including increased social-emotional security, increased student support, increased adult support, and increased school connectedness. As such, extracurricular activities may be one significant source of improved overall school climate. The finding that increased supports created by extracurricular activities is aligned with results from Cornell et al. (2016) who suggested that social support was connected to improved outcomes in schools. Consequently, the literature has indicated strong support for using social support as a means of improving academic outcomes.

A strong community has also been attached to positive academic outcomes among children. Specifically, children who had a lack of community suffered multiple negative outcomes (Berg & Aber, 2015). These negative outcomes included academic difficulties and lack of engagement within their schools. There was a weaker relationship found connecting teachers' perceptions of school safety and student support with academic outcomes. Consequently, there was evidence for community, social support, and school safety as variables leading toward improved positive academic outcomes.

The association between social support and academic outcomes was previously asserted by Martinez et al. (2016) and Cornell et al. (2016). However, the research by Berg and Aber (2015) indicated that child-environment fit played a specific role in producing improved outcomes. The degree of fit between a student and their school environment was predictive of increased school engagement, indicating the importance of considering environmental fit when attempting to improve student outcomes.

**Zero-tolerance policies and school climate.** Wald and Losen (2003) and Black (2014) noted that the development of zero-tolerance policies was meant to deal with a certain body of behaviors that needed to result in suspension or outright expulsion of the student. Such policies resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of police officers present in schools to enforce these policies and were therefore linked to an increasing reliance on the criminal justice system to address maladaptive behavior (Black, 2014).

The SPP refers students to the court system for behaviors that are disruptive. Cobb (2009) noted that this shift had placed a significant number of students at risk of facing prison punishments. Wald and Losen (2003) suggested that both adult prisons and juvenile prison systems were occupied by individuals who had traveled through the pipeline from poor student behavior to criminal justice referral and, finally, imprisonment. An estimated 68% of prison inmates in 1997 failed to complete high school while 75% of youth beneath the age of eighteen who were sentenced to adult prisons had not completed the tenth grade. The findings suggested that harsh penalties for behavioral infractions removed students from the education system, leading not only

to imprisonment, but also the loss of educational opportunities that would be needed for success later in life (Wald and Losen, 2003).

When students perceive their respective school climates negatively, often school performance is negatively affected and that may lead to lower academic success. Factors that may influence the creation of school climate include school leadership approach, the availability of extracurricular activities to students, safety, and the implementation of zero-tolerance policies for student misbehavior. Additionally, evidence suggests that the implementation of RJ may mitigate much of disruptive behavior within classrooms that lead to a reduction in negative traits associated with school climates.

In this way, the factors that influence school climate become important to this project; as one facet of the overall goal of this project is to reduce the removal of disruptive students from the classroom environment. If perceptions of negative school climate can be mitigated, students demonstrate reduced disruptive behavior overall. To more comprehensively understand the effect of RJ within the classroom environment, emphasis must be placed on how the need for RJ within education was facilitated.

### **RJ and Zero-Tolerance Policies**

RJ is thought to be more effective at reducing ongoing aberrant behavior than more punitive measures (Latimer et al., 2005). RJ has previously been linked to a decrease in criminal behavior to a superior degree than punitive approaches (Latimer et al., 2005). Researchers indicated that there were numerous reasons to use a non-punitive approach, given that realigning nonviolent offenders within their community kept

students within the academic environment rather than removed them from it (Skiba, 2014).

RJ practices became increasingly desirable as zero-tolerance policies led to an increasing number of youths being pushed out of school, as racial disparities in punitive practices became more heavily evidence, and as police referrals made the legal system an increasingly common part of the school experience (Fronius et al., 2019). This made the use of RJ desirable considering that Wald and Losen (2003) noted the significant numbers of individuals in prison who did have a high school degree or even a 10th grade education. The statement by Skiba (2014) is also consistent with that of Zehr (2015) who noted that the importance of RJ was that it involved multiple stakeholders. Therefore, RJ could be useful for addressing the concern for multiple stakeholders, helping to address the injuries experienced by each stakeholder, and reintegrating the offender within that community. The RJ approach has become an increasingly important part of the criminal justice system. This approach is contrary to the punitive methods that typically characterized responses to maladaptive student behavior under zero-tolerance approaches.

Researchers have warned against zero-tolerance and the benefits of RJ because the United States already possessed the largest prison population in the world (Thompson, 2016; Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014). The costs to taxpayers have reached several billion dollars resulting in an era that the United States combined the highest incarceration rate with the highest debt rate in its history. Zero-tolerance fed into this by

referring students into the criminal justice system while disproportionately harming ethnic minorities (Triplett et al., 2014)

RJ may be one means of breaking the SPP. Schiff (2013) indicated that the practices consistent with RJ may be able to help reduce the flow of juveniles moving from school violations on to criminal charges. RJ practices avoided the heavy involvement of law enforcement officials, legal interventions, and prisons as a means of addressing maladaptive behavior. Wald and Losen (2003) indicated that such approaches may further isolate and alienate a student, distancing them from their communities and further removing them from their schools. As such, RJ approaches may be desirable since they helped to improve the reintegration of students rather than push them further away from rehabilitation.

There are multiple reasons why RJ may be key to breaking the SPP. The restorative approach to justice helps address academic failure, eliminates exclusionary discipline practices that isolate individuals rather than reintegrates them, and reduces the chance of students dropping out of school (Christle et al., 2005; Schiff, 2013). RJ shifts the emphasis away from isolating the offender and toward reintegration (Gonzales, 2012). As such, RJ is important given how it is connected to not only addressing the injury done to others, but also because of its ability to help reintegrate individuals and ensure that they continue with their schooling. RJ may be able to help address not only the concerns of the community but also the needs of the individual.

Wood and Suzuki (2016) have identified at least four major challenges regarding RJ that needed to be addressed going forward. The first of these problems was the lack

of consistent definitions for RJ. Researchers indicated that the terms used in RJ study often fluctuated greatly, suggesting that there was little consistency between studies regarding the effectiveness of RJ. Another problem was that the word restorative has been used in multiple contexts. As such, a systemized definition of RJ still needs to be established, including a definition of all the practices involved with this system. There was also a problem of institutionalization. RJ was originally conceived as a means of avoiding the traditional criminal justice approach, however RJ had increasingly been used within prison contexts. A final challenge to RJ has been that its practice was often limited to lesser offenses and it was not often used to address more severe problems. Thus, researchers indicated that the relevance of RJ is increasingly questionable given its marginalization and expanding use as a tool only used to address minor issues (Wood & Suzuki, 2016).

There are also indications that not enough research has been conducted into RJ to apply the model in a consistent manner. Song and Swearer (2016) indicate some important questions concerning the future of RJ. First, researchers need to determine how RJ methods work, and to what degree. Data has indicated that schools were attempting to implement RJ practices without a full understanding of what techniques to use and the outcomes that could result. Future research needs to be directed at RJ strategies and gaining a better understanding of what outcomes they produce. Researchers also need to come to a better understanding of whether consistency with principles of human relationship, empowerment, and collaboration is important to achieving desired outcomes. Another area of future research available is whether RJ

would help promote racial equity in school discipline procedures. In addition, research needs to be conducted into whether RJ helps deter school bullying. Finally, the areas of research available include understanding what sort of training is required for school staff to effectively implement RJ and evaluating the effect of consultation training on improving RJ practices (Song & Swearer, 2016).

The concept of RJ and its key principles is not universally agreed upon. Daly (2016) indicated that multiple theories surround RJ. One of the most prominent views is that RJ is the opposite of retributive justice. To this, Daly (2016) suggested that there was a false assumption that the qualities of RJ made it good versus retributive justice being bad. Daly argued that this may not be the case and that retributive justice encompasses several qualities that could be deemed good, thereby positioning the two forms of justice not as binary opposites but rather systems along a spectrum. RJ promotes accountability and repairing harm in conjunction with natural or mandated consequences, not instead of them (Daly, 2016). Different measures of what constituted justice may in some cases favor RJ and in other cases favor retributive justice.

Researchers exploring the literature have indicated that there were yet other concerns that existed regarding RJ practices. While there was support for RJ, researchers indicated that there were tensions between those who wanted RJ to remain a grassroots initiative and those who wanted to professionalize it (Karp & Frank, 2016). As such, future research into RJ should include research to address this tension. The researchers noted that there was growing awareness of the role of RJ in schools, however legislation needed to be created that allowed for RJ alternatives to traditional court hearing that



young people underwent as a result of their behavior. A fourth area of concern was lack of funding for RJ organizations that continued to struggle to grow due to lack of funding. Finally, the researchers indicated that the future of RJ was tied to racial justice, and that future RJ efforts should be designed to reduce racial disparities in school discipline.

As this project is focused on reducing academic exclusion for nonviolent problematic students, in an attempt to improve overall success later in life, understanding how zero-tolerance policies facilitate the need for RJ is important, especially in middle school settings where a gap in literature persists. Additionally, research on the relationship between race and the effects of RJ within schools with higher minority populations is needed to better understand how to implement RJ initiatives in the future.

### **Race**

RJ may be particularly useful in helping to address justice in schools with regard to racial disparities. Racial threat hypothesis suggests that a school's racial composition is highly correlated with the form of justice used, with punitive, rather than reparative, approaches being used much more commonly in environments with specific racial compositions (Payne & Welch, 2013). Therefore, RJ could potentially address some racial disparities in schools.

Payne and Welch (2016) indicated that there was an increasing focus on using punitive responses to student behavior rather than reparative ones that was consistent with the assertion by Cobb (2009) that schools were increasingly focused on punishing students rather than using a reparative approach to reintegrate students. Payne and Welch (2013) indicated that this might have a disproportionate effect on schools where there

were a high number of black students, since punitive approaches were far more likely to be employed in these schools. This assertion was consistent with Fronius et al. (2019), who also noted that punitive approaches were increasingly associated with minority heavy schools, creating racial disparities in how minority students were treated versus white students.

Payne and Welch (2013) indicated that such punitive approaches put black students at much greater risk of entering the SPP. The researchers found that the student body composition was therefore associated with several negative outcomes due to the punitive approaches used by school administrators in these contexts. There was less use of school conferences, less chance of people using peer mediation, fewer opportunities for restitution, and less use of community service as a means of reintegrating individuals into the community. The punitive approach used much more in schools with a heavy black population meant that these students were far more likely to fail in school, drop out, or experience an increase in their delinquent behavior. These same students were less likely to enjoy the positive climate associated with restorative practices, teachers were less likely to experience the morale boost of a restorative environment, and the community as a whole was more likely to suffer due to the higher rates of imprisonment and greater levels of dropout. As such, black students are far more likely to experience a host of negative outcomes associated with punitive approaches.

Other researchers have also noted the fact that African American students are more likely than their white peers to be rated as disruptive. Wright (2015) noted that the degree of congruence between teachers and students affected teachers' perceptions

regarding whether a student was being disruptive or not. The degree of student and teacher incongruence also contributed to increased suspension rates. Research into this phenomenon has revealed that African American students were less likely to be rated as disruptive when they had an African American teacher, therefore resulting in less suspensions. The assertion that there were racial disparities in punitive measures was consistent with the assertion by Payne and Welch (2013) that student body composition as associated with increase punitive measures. Wright's (2015) research indicated that part of addressing this phenomenon may include increasing the number of African American teachers working at a school with a high African American population. However, Payne and Welch (2013) indicated that one alternative may be to implement social justice principles that shifted a school away from a punitive culture to a restorative one. Racially based disparities in punishment may therefore be addressed in one of several ways.

The importance of improving engagement among African Americans is noted as a means of improving academic achievement. Specifically, Griffin (2014) indicated that school engagement played a mediating role between school racial climate and academic achievement among African American students. The study was conducted among 138 African American adolescent youth. The first finding to emerge from the study was that there was an indirect effect regarding the perceptions of racial fairness on academic outcomes. The level of engagement among students, both behavioral and cognitive engagement, mediated the relationship between that perception of racial fairness and academic outcomes. Previous research suggested that typically, there was a high degree

of correlation between punitive justice and racial composition (Payne & Welch, 2013). However, the research by Griffin (2014) indicated that at least one means of improving outcomes among students and avoiding the negative outcomes associated with a high concentration of African American students may be through the increase of student engagement.

While engagement may be among African American students, it may be difficult to promote such engagement. Research between white and black students revealed that there each group had different perceptions of school climate and experienced high degrees of variability in student engagement (Konold et al., 2017). Black students often perceived their school climate as being less supportive. These students felt teachers did not provide support and yet simultaneously felt that more as being demanded of the students. Students also felt that the discipline systems in these schools were poorly structured and unfair. This finding is consistent with Shukla et al. (2016), who indicated that fair discipline systems were more conducive to improved academic outcomes. The discipline gap cited by Konold et al. (2017) indicated that black high school students were the most likely to misbehave in cases when there was a lack of trust between students and teachers. If students felt that their teachers did not care, they were more likely to act out. Further, when appropriate disciplinary structure and supports were not in place, suspension rates were likely to rise. The research findings suggested the importance of maintaining appropriate discipline and support to improving academic outcomes specifically among minority students, who were the most likely to feel distrustful of existing school systems.

Minority students are more likely than Caucasian students to exhibit disruptive behavior as there are higher rates of mistrust between students and educators or school administration (Payne & Welch, 2016). Payne and Welch (2016) further found that the relationship between student race and consequences of disruptive behavior exists in such a way that minority students are often punished more harshly than Caucasian peers, including being removed more often from educational settings. However, a gap in literature remains to explain the how the relationship between student and educator relationships affect the implementation of RJ within schools with higher minority populations (Konold et al., 2017).

The need for RJ has been demonstrated throughout the first part of this chapter. School climate, zero-tolerance policies within schools, and race all affect the rate of disruptive behavior expression that creates greater incidences of discipline, including removal, throughout school systems. When a student is disciplined often, they are more likely to face increasingly harsher punishment until problematic students are permanently removed from the classroom that affects later life success and the quality of community involvement. The subsequent section of this literature review will present information on outcomes of RJ when successfully implemented.

### **Outcomes of RJ Implementation**

RJ has been pointed to as a cost-effective means of reducing the chance of repeat offenses. Sherman, Strang, Mayo-Wilson, Woods, and Ariel (2015) examined previous research, reviewing 519 previous studies and identifying 10 studies who met the criteria for inclusion in their research review. The final review measured recidivism among

1,880 offenders. This meta-analysis indicated that RJ produced a modest improvement in recidivism. However, the most significant advantage found in the use of RJ versus punitive practices was its cost-effective nature. The use of a RJ approach was up to 8.1 times cost beneficial versus the use of punitive practices. These findings suggested the importance of using restorative practices not only when considering means of reducing recidivism but also when considering what practices was most cost effective.

RJ has also been applied in increasingly younger age groups, with application among three to five-year-old children. Researchers attempted to better understand how a sense of justice developed in children and how RJ practices could be applied in younger age groups (Riedl, Jensen, Call, & Tomasello, 2015). Researchers noted that even children responded to norm violations, demonstrating behavior consistent with a sense of justice. Younger age groups were more likely to share with puppets that helped, rather than harmed, others. At age six, children demonstrated a willingness to pay if it meant that individuals would be punished for negative actions. What researchers found in their study was that children were also more likely to choose practices that were consistent with restorative rather than punitive practices. When a third party behaved negatively, children were more likely to choose approaches that restored the relationship rather than removed the offender. Such findings indicated that a sense of RJ was found early in human development and that children felt the need to address harms early in life through the use of third-party interventions.

There was evidence that RJ practices had a positive effect on student behavior. Researcher examined two different school years, 2016 to 2017 and 2017 to 2018, to

determine the outcome of implementing RJ practices with regard to behavioral affect (Hammel, 2018). Researchers gauged the outcomes by assessing how many in-school interventions were required as a result of student behavior. Following analysis of the data from both years and comparing the resulting outcomes, the researcher concluded that implementing RJ had a positive outcome. The number of in-school responses to negative behaviors dropped after the RJ practices were implemented. These findings added further evidence that RJ had a positive effect on behavior.

Researchers also examined RJ circles to see if they were effective at overcoming structural barriers. Researchers specifically looked at the stigma surrounding sex offenders after they were released from prison (Bohmert, Duwe, & Hipple, 2016). Researchers were interested in learning how RJ might help sex offender reentry to the public and how RJ practices might help reduce recidivism. The practices researchers were interested in included providing various social supports that might help to reduce recidivism. These social supports were provided in the form of Circles of Support and Accountability, a RJ practice characterized by support circles designed to facilitate the reentry of individuals to the public. The study was conducted in Minnesota and revealed that up to 75% of offenders reported receiving anywhere from weak to moderate levels of social support. Up to 70% receiving instrumental support and 100% reported receiving expressive support. Instrumental support referred to relationships that helped individuals achieve a goal while expressive support typically took the form of friendships and advice (Bohmert et al., 2016). Importantly, these various forms of support helped offenders helped to reduce recidivism.

RJ has also been examined within the context of prisons. Researchers noted that RJ represented a potential alternative to the traditional prison disciplinary process (Butler & Maruna, 2016). Within the context of prisons, small disciplinary hearings were often used as a means of addressing prisoner offenses. Traditionally, these small hearings were viewed by prisoners as illegitimate in their decisions, and researchers noted that RJ may be one means of restoring the legitimacy of these hearings and offering a means of redressing offenses. The RJ process was conceived of as an adjudicated alternative to the adversarial model of justice used in these small hearings. Within the adjudicated setting suggested by RJ, prisoners had a chance to apologize and account for their poor behavior. This helped address the harm done to the victim and allowed the two parties to engage with one another as human beings.

Researchers suggest that the outcomes for offenders may be fairer using RJ practices than the alternatives. A study was conducted comparing RJ based conferences to criminal courts (Barnes, Hyatt, Angel, Strang, & Sherman, 2015). Researchers drew upon observational data and found that RJ based conferences were superior to criminal courts at engaging offenders in the adjudicative process. These conferences were contingent on the use of reintegrative shaming that was characterized by dialogues created to provide social support to the offender while also making it clear the harm that the offender committed through their actions. This approach was meant to raise awareness of the harm done within the offender without personally demoralizing the offender. These approaches were consistent with the RJ philosophy and kept the offender's engagement high, reducing the likeliness that they would recidivate.



The use of RJ approaches has been seen to have a positive affect at the teen court level. Evans, Smokowski, Barbee, Bower, and Barefoot (2016) noted that teen courts were typically proposed as an alternative to the justice systems. The point of teen courts was to reintegrate first-time adolescent offenders rather than refer them immediately into the prison system and isolated them from their communities. Analysis of teen courts revealed that these reintegrative procedures had a positive effect on those participating. Teen court participants saw a decrease in their delinquent friend and a reduction peer pressure. Other positive improvements included a reduction in aggression, violence, and delinquency. The results of this study indicated that participation in these courts rather than traditional judicial courts led to positive improvements in the relationships between individuals who attended teen court. As such, the researchers concluded that a RJ approach would have a positive effect on improving the relationships of teens and reduce their negative behavioral traits.

### **Best Practices for RJ Implementation**

One means for employing RJ practices was proposed in the form of RJ hubs. Johnson et al. (2015) noted that such hubs had become increasingly popular in Chicago as the city attempted to reduce the amount of youth violence occurring within the city. RJ hubs were proposed a means of providing supports that would prevent individuals from becoming involved with gangs while improving neighborhood safety. These hubs were founded in the principles of i) creating a welcoming environment, ii) providing guidance through a youth's life, iii) creating valued relationships with the youth and their family, iv) creating high engagement between youth and organizations that support their

success, and v) increasing collaboration between RJ hubs. In practice, these hubs helped promote the resilience of those attending and addressed some of the trauma individuals suffered that might contribute to their negative behavior. Because these hubs lack all the resources necessary for supporting attendees, the hubs work in close collaboration with other community resources to support the success of these students.

In practice, researchers indicated that there need to be a few principles that schools adhered to and best practices to follow prior to implementing RJ. Gregory, Soffer, Gaines, Hurley, and Karikehalli (2016) indicated that before implementing RJ was for there to be a comprehensive vision for implementing RJ. The principles outlined by researchers was a need for i) recognizing the humanity of students and educators, ii) establishing room for all stakeholders, iii) providing opportunities to repair the harms done, iv) ensuring that cultural competence is integrated into a vision for justice, and v) ensuring overlapping, interconnected efforts between stakeholders to ensure social and racial justice are integrated into RJ efforts. From the beginning of implementing RJ efforts, it is important for schools to prioritize whole community building efforts. These efforts need to integrate adult efforts with interventions directed at students, with stakeholders made aware of how RJ may help to improve outcomes (Gregory et al., 2016).

There have also been new directions established for the implementation of RJ. Whole school interventions may be the most effective means for improving student outcomes (Gonzalez, Sattler, & Buth, 2019). The researchers noted that despite RJ's increasing popularity, there were few studies that examined its implementation at an early

stage. Gregory et al. (2016) indicated that there needed to be a strong strategy, starting with a clear vision for RJ, established from early in a program's implementation.

Gonzalez et al. (2019) examined this early phase of RJ through a study of a small urban high school as it implemented RJ practices over multiple years. A whole school model was implemented that was characterized by attempts to improve relationships between students, teachers, and staff. The whole school model also emphasized the use of emotional learning practices. Finally, the whole school model as characterized by attempts to implement approaches that did not address single issues that arose in a school but rather promoted changes that were lasting. These lasting changes included shifting to a nonauthoritarian culture and emphasizing emotional and social learning competencies (Gonzalez et al., 2019). The researchers found that the change to this whole school model of RJ created improved relationships, improved professional skills development among educators, improvements to leadership and social emotional learning.

RJ also helped to reduce the harms done within companies. Schormair and Gerlach (2019) noted that there was a lack of effective remediation mechanisms in businesses. Business related human rights violations warranted a response, but businesses were often unable to provide appropriate remediation for such violation. The researchers noted that the practices of alternative dispute resolution and RJ were both useful in addressing such violations. The researchers proposed a dialogue driven framework within which RJ principles could be applied. This framework allowed for various harms done to victims to be addressed. This framework required that complaints from victims be promptly investigated. Following the collection of data, the remediation

process should take place by bringing together victims, offenders, and members of the surrounding community such that the concerns of all stakeholders were addressed (Schormair & Gerlach, 2019). The resulting dialogues would help each party discuss the wrongdoing, repair the harms done, and establish a culture that similar violations would be avoided in the future.

A version of a RJ program known as the Student Accountability and Restorative Research Project was implemented on college campuses. Karp and Frank (2016) noted that this study was formed of four different phases in the process. When harm was done, researchers recommended that the first step was to establish common ground. Students were invited to a safe space where the harmed party and the person committed harm could meet together. At the meeting, these individuals then identify the effect of the harm done. The extent of the harm done was established by having the offender pay attention to three types of harm done: personal, material, and communal. Personal harm referred to physical and emotional harm, material harm referred to damaged and lost property, while communal harm referred to damage to the community. Afterward, individuals strategized how to repair the damages done. Finally, a support system was established across the community to help participants in the program rebound, heal, and succeed in their future studies.

Researchers have also suggested that RJ can be used as a means of addressing sexual violence on college campuses rather than use highly punitive measures. This approach revolved around asking who was harmed, why they committed the harm, and how the harm could be repaired. A reparative justice approach asked for the involved

parties to talk in a meeting facilitated by a counselor. Researchers indicated that using this counselor-facilitated healing approach was linked to a reduction in recidivism among these sexual offenders. The researchers recommended that there be a Title IX Coordinator on all college campuses to facilitate such meetings and reduce the chance of repeat offenses through these meetings. Importantly, researchers did not indicate that punitive approaches would be completely taken off the table. Rather, after healing circles, victims should be free to continue taking punitive measures if they so choose. The purpose of the healing-circle was therefore partly to ensure recidivism did not occur.

### **Conclusion**

Although the perception of overall school climate is largely subjective in regard to the student body, negative and positive factors may influence student experience within the classroom (Gase et al., 2018). Factors that may influence the creation of school climate include school leadership approach, the availability of extracurricular activities to students, safety and the implementation of zero-tolerance policies for student misbehavior (Gase et al., 2018). As negative views of school climate may reduce overall student academic success, understanding how to mitigate issues that create unfavorable opinions of school climate is necessary to creating solutions. In addition to school climate and zero-tolerance policies, race has been found to be a driving motivator behind the demonstration of behavioral issues within student populations, as minority students express less trust of school educators and administrations.

The implementation of RJ is one way that disruptive behavior from students can be lessened and that may lead to more positive school climates and further reductions in

problematic behavior, however, it is not fully understood to what extent RJ may improve outcomes for students involved in nonviolent middle school rules violations. Many schools, communities, and programs are using components of RJ; however, implementation and effectiveness have not been researched using sufficient scientific methods to establish replicable examples (Fronius et al., 2019). There is limited scientific literature examining the effects of RJ on victim satisfaction, offender accountability, school environment, and community involvement (Hurley et al., 2015). As such, the purpose of this study is to examine that relationship to determine if RJ interventions have an effect on middle school-aged youths who undergo such interventions. The proposed study will add to the existing literature regarding RJ and how it affects school aged children.

Chapter 3 Methodology will describe the study's research design, tests, and data analysis plan intended to address the research questions. Data was drawn from a sample of middle school aged children and compare those who experienced responses using a RJ intervention versus those who did not. Given the use of previously collected data about human subjects as a part of the study, additional information regarding ethical treatment and privacy of the participants will also be discussed. The purpose of Chapter 3 is to present detailed discussions of the quantitative methodology and causal comparative design used for conducting this study. A restatement of the research questions and hypotheses introduces Chapter 3. Discussions in Chapter 3 also describe the population, sample selection, validity, reliability, data collection, and data analysis procedures, as well as ethical considerations.

### Chapter 3: Research Methodology

RJ is a program-based intervention that aims to counteract the results of zero-tolerance policies on students and the SPP (Cobb, 2009). It is a system of methods for realigning delinquent behaviors with more adaptive behaviors to promote effective communication, accountability, and to ensure the safety of students and staff (Wachtel, 2013). Research has shown that restorative programs are more effective responses to criminal behavior than traditional approaches (Latimer et al., 2005). However, there is an absence of recent, comprehensive, scientifically valid evaluations of RJ programs, providing an opportunity for researchers to focus specifically on the effect of restorative programs as well as their unintended consequences (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

Gaps in the current literature demonstrate a lack of in-depth analyses regarding the effectiveness of RJ as a response to nonviolent rule violations, specifically within the middle school environment. The purpose of conducting this study using quantitative methodology with a non experimental comparative design is to investigate the effectiveness of RJ for middle school student rule violations. Specifically, I intended to determine whether RJ leads to a decrease in the exclusionary discipline practices of in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, as well as a decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behavior among middle school students.

In Chapter 3, I present a review of the research objectives and an in-depth discussion of the rationale for the chosen methodology, target population, sampling and sampling procedures, data collection, and how the data will be used and analyzed. The following sections include arguments for the use of the qualitative methodology and the

causal comparative research design, as well as the research questions and hypotheses that will be utilized to conduct the study. The research questions and hypotheses address whether and to what extent does RJ effect on the use of exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students. In the methodology section, I will address the population, sampling procedures, data collection, and data analysis. This section includes the justification for using middle school students in Clayton County as a target population, as well as the convenience sampling method. A step-by-step description of data collection and data analysis will follow.

The next section will include discussion about the threats to validity, and the processes to be utilized to decrease these threats. I will also describe ethical procedures to ensure confidentiality and protection of data. Finally, I will summarize the section and the section transition into Chapter 4.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The purpose of this study is to examine whether significant differences exist in the frequency of in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors before and after the implementation of RJ programs among middle school students. The independent variable in this study is the use of the RJ program. The dependent variables are the number of in-school suspensions, number of out-of-school suspensions, number of expulsions, and number of repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors after initial discipline action. A comparative design was utilized due to ethics, available data, and the objective to show a cause and effect relationship. The use of archival data contributes to the usage of a causal comparative



design, because I will use de facto groups to determine the effectiveness of RJ. Because it would be implausible and unethical to experimentally manipulate conditions of a population of school children, this study requires the use of groups that are already differentiated. As such, the effectiveness of specific facets of RJ in terms of practices and effects on juvenile outcomes that would require inferential statistics to determine a correlation will not be determined. Instead, comparative analysis was demonstrated by examining the effect of the general use of RJ practices on suspensions, expulsions, and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. This will create grounds for future studies to examine RJ practices to determine which practices within the program are effective and ineffective strategies.

## **Methodology**

### **Population**

The target population for this study was middle school students aged 11 to 15 years who attended school in Clayton County and have been referred to the Clayton County juvenile court system. The population included Clayton County middle school students who attended a school that used RJ and middle school students who attended a school that did not use RJ. The population size was approximately 1,500 students when comparing two schools.

### **Sampling and Sampling Procedures**

A convenience sample was utilized, due to the available data, to form a RJ group and a non RJ group. Student and juvenile court records were separated into the two groups. Because the students or schools could not be manipulated, the sampling could

not be randomized. Included data were the number of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions. Detention and any other non exclusionary discipline practices were not included.

### **Data Collection**

Open available record data were collected from the Clayton County school district and juvenile court system public website. This information shall include the numbers of exclusionary discipline practices utilized, and the number of repetitive offenses. Obtaining records directly from the Georgia state database for school district information provides the most direct access to the information needed to conduct this study.

### **Operationalization**

Upon approval and receiving the discipline records, the data was sorted into groups of RJ and non RJ. The following inquiry was tested:

RQ1: Is there a significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_01$ : There is no significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_a1$ : There is a significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

RQ2: Is there a significant decrease of out of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_02$ : There is no significant decrease of out-of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_{a2}$ : There is a significant decrease of out-of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

RQ3: Is there a significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_{03}$ : There is no significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_{a3}$ : There is a significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

RQ4: Is there a significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_{04}$ : There is no significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_{a4}$ : There is a significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

The numbers of exclusionary discipline practices was accounted for, as well as repetitive occurrences, for each group. Data were input into a statistical software, such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows, and a  $t$ -test was run to determine a difference of the number of exclusionary discipline practices by type between the schools that use RJ versus the schools that do not. Significance was

determined from an alpha level of .05. Results were interpreted by determining if there is a significant difference between the use of exclusionary discipline practices and the number of repetitive occurrences based upon the presence of RJ.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis for this study was performed using SPSS, to provide a range of descriptive and inferential statistics. SPSS software is used extensively by researchers in the educational as well as social and behavioral sciences (Hinton, McMurray, & Brownlow, 2014). The advantage of using SPSS is that it is user friendly and enables the researcher to export data from Microsoft Excel easily. All required statistical tests for this study were conducted in SPSS.

All data were preprocessed using Microsoft Excel. Preprocessing aims to ensure a clean data set by excluding data outliers and missing data. Only those students who have complete information on all the variables were included in the data analysis. If a value is missing, the entire case was removed from the analysis (listwise deletion). In listwise deletion, a case is dropped from an analysis because it has a missing value in at least one of the specified variables (Pepinsky, 2018). Once a complete, clean data set had been achieved it was then exported to SPSS for data analysis.

Descriptive analysis was conducted first to characterize the demographics of the participants as well as their responses to the survey. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were computed. Charts, such as pie charts and histogram, were generated to accompany the descriptive analysis.

The data plan includes inferential statistical analysis; specifically an independent sample *t*-test was conducted to address the research questions and test the hypotheses of the study. The independent samples *t*-test is used to compare the means of two independent groups to determine whether there is statistical evidence that the associated population means are significantly different (Warner, 2013). Specifically, I conducted an independent *t*-test to evaluate whether statistically significant differences exist on the in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors before and after the implementation of RJ programs among middle school students.

Because independent samples *t*-test is considered a parametric test, certain assumptions must be met before it can be used. There are four assumptions of parametric tests that include (a) normality, (b) homogeneity of variance, (c) linearity, and (d) independence (Sedgwick, 2015). A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed to detect if all study variables comply with the normality assumption (Siddiqi, 2014). Second, a test for homogeneity of variance was conducted using Levene's test that investigates for a constant variance of error for the independent variable, by plotting residuals versus predicted values, and residuals versus independent variables (Parra-Frutos, 2013). If the scatterplots of the variables are patternless, it suggests that the error is consistent across the range of predicted values, hence the assumption is met. Third, a linearity test was conducted to test for a linear relationship between the two variables (Sedgwick, 2015). The linearity test involves producing scatterplots to establish if the mean of the outcome variable for each increment fall on a straight line. Last, a test for outliers was conducted

through visual inspection of histograms and boxplots to meet the assumption of independence (Huber & Melly, 2015).

### **Threats to Validity**

Potential threats to the validity of this study are the lack of randomization and the inability to manipulate the independent variable. However, I did not aim to find a correlation between the independent variable and the dependent variables. Threats to internal validity include sample selection bias that was remedied by choosing sample populations that have similar demographics. If necessary, statistical matching was utilized to ensure equal groups are being compared. Geography may be a potential threat to external validity, because it may affect the nature of discipline and how it is handled. For example, some states may use corporal punishment in lieu of exclusionary discipline. Therefore, results may only be generalized to other districts and states that have similar discipline practices and outcomes.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Approval from the Walden Institution Review Board (IRB) is needed before conducting the study or manipulating data from the Clayton County juvenile court and school district. Due to the target population of this study being minors, and involves confidential and sensitive information, archival data that is open to the public was used in order remain within the law concerning records of this population. All records that access is granted to were protected and secured by encryption. It is assumed that there were no individual identifiers included within the records, but anonymity, including the schools involved, was ensured. Data will be secured and maintained on a password

protected flash drive and kept for 5 years, then destroyed or permanently deleted following the end of this period. I was the only person with access to the data during this research project.

### **Scope and Limitations**

The scope of this study includes the following:

1. The sample will only include middle school students between the ages of 11 to 15 years. The results from this study may not be generalizable to other age groups of students. Therefore, the sample may not represent all students in the United States that have been referred to the juvenile court system.
2. Data: The study was delimited to students attending school in Clayton County, Georgia. The rationale for selecting the county is that it will assist in making the data collection manageable for the time constraints of the study. As such, the results of this study may not be generalizable to other counties.
3. Method: The decision to use a quantitative methodology rather than a qualitative method is that it offers less bias since the responses were numeric. A larger sample will provide a way to gather more data and look at patterns and trends from the participants' responses.

Limitations that potentially might affect this study's results and strategies for resolution follow:

1. Experience and Instrumentation: The researcher is a novice researcher. However, the use of a published validated and reliable instrument will minimize investigator errors and bias. The purpose for using existing validated research tools on multi-

item rating scales provides more reliability and validity related to the variables under examination (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

2. **Sample:** The convenience sample is the middle school students in Clayton County. The study relies on the archival data gathered by the chosen school district that might show bias and may not be accurate.
3. **Methodology and Data Collection:** The researcher selected a quantitative methodology. The use of a quantitative method provides precise, numeric data, without the investigator's direct involvement. The methodology is useful for identifying common patterns or trends in large groups of respondents (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).
4. **Research Design:** The causal comparative research design is selected for this study because it is useful in determining the differences between two groups based on a response variable. However, the causal comparative design cannot establish a true cause-effect relationship due to its lack of randomness in sample.

### **Summary**

I used a quantitative methodology and causal comparative design to determine the efficacy of the RJ program for middle school environments. Archival data were used to determine if the use of RJ decreases the use of exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behavior. The target population was middle school students within the Clayton County school system and was separated into groups based on the schools' usage of RJ through a convenience sampling method. After obtaining IRB approval, number 04-24-20-0586236, open access records were gathered from the



juvenile courts and school districts, and the data were categorized based on the independent variable. The data were analyzed using a *t*-test to determine the differences between schools that use RJ, and those that do not. Threats to validity were minimized to ensure a degree of generalizability of the results. Ethical considerations were taken to protect the data. Chapter 4 provides an in-depth discussion on the data analysis and outcomes before the results are discussed in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to use a quantitative approach to examine archival data pertaining to the efficacy of using RJ, specifically in middle school environments, for the reduction of exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. These discipline practices included in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. Data was collected from the state of Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) K-12 Student Discipline Dashboard regarding the Clayton County school district to address the following research questions.

RQ1: Is there a significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

RQ2: Is there a significant decrease of out of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

RQ3: Is there a significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

RQ4: Is there a significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

The following is a discussion of the study's population and sample as well as a demographic description of the sample. Demographic descriptions included frequencies and percentages for categorical (nominal) variables and descriptive statistics of minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation for variables measured at the interval level of measurement. Also presented are parametric assumptions validation for the

statistical analysis and results of hypothesis testing. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the results of this study.

### **Data Collection**

The target population for this study included middle school students aged 11 to 15 years who attended school in Clayton County and have been referred to the Clayton County juvenile court system. The population included Clayton County middle school students who attended a school that uses RJ as well as those that did not. The population size was approximately 1,500 students. Archival data were obtained through convenience sample of student and juvenile court records. Included in the data were the number of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for school years 2014 through 2019.

The sample utilized consisted of  $N = 305$  schools where nine (3.0%) were charter schools and 296 (97.0%) were noncharter schools. Table 1 provides this information.

Table 1

#### *Frequency and Percentage of Charter Versus Noncharter Schools*

|            | <i>N</i> | %     |
|------------|----------|-------|
| Noncharter | 296      | 97.0  |
| Charter    | 9        | 3.0   |
| Total      | 305      | 100.0 |

*Note.* From GOSA K-12 Student Discipline Dashboard public website.

According to Latimer et al. (2005), restorative programs are more effective responses to criminal behavior than traditional approaches in the areas of victim and offender satisfaction, restitution compliance, and recidivism. It was hypothesized that RJ

programs would decrease the number of suspensions, both in and out of school, expulsions, and maladaptive behaviors. The theory being that RJ provides a framework for reducing student suspensions and expulsions stemming from maladaptive behaviors. In order test this, data on these dependent variables were collected from an existing secondary source of student disciplinary records. In school suspension percentages ranged from 0.0% to 35.5% ( $M = 6.30\%$ ,  $SD = 8.35\%$ ); Out-of-school suspension percentages ranged from 0.3% to 28.8% ( $M = 7.48\%$ ,  $SD = 5.60\%$ ); Expulsion suspension percentages ranged from 0.0% to 0.1% ( $M = 0.0\%$ ,  $SD = 0.02\%$ ); and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors ranged from 10 to 690 ( $M = 145.83$ ,  $SD = 141.75$ ). Table 2 depicts this information.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables*

|                                     | <i>N</i> | Min | Max  | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-----|------|----------|-----------|
| In-school suspensions               | 305      | .0  | 35.5 | 6.30     | 8.35      |
| Out-of-school suspensions           | 305      | .3  | 28.8 | 7.48     | 5.60      |
| Expulsions                          | 305      | .0  | .1   | .00      | .02       |
| Occurrences of maladaptive behavior | 305      | 10  | 690  | 145.83   | 141.75    |

*Note.* From GOSA K-12 Student Discipline Dashboard public website

Table 3 depicts in-school and out-of-school suspension percentages, expulsion percentage, and occurrences of maladaptive behavior of students from 2014 to 2019.

Table 3

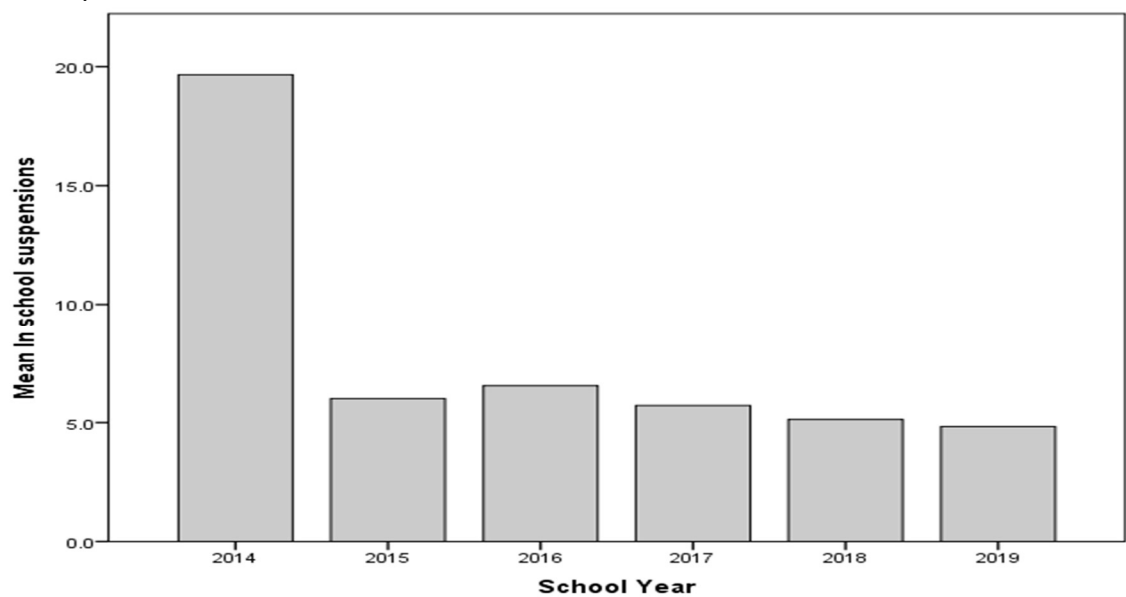
*Suspensions, Expulsions, and Occurrences of Maladaptive Behavior by School Year*

| School year |                                     | <i>N</i> | Min | Max  | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|----------|-----|------|----------|-----------|
| 2014        | In-school suspensions               | 14       | 6.7 | 35.5 | 19.66    | 6.55      |
|             | out-of-school suspensions           | 14       | 2.6 | 28.8 | 14.53    | 6.27      |
|             | Expulsions                          | 14       | .0  | .0   | .00      | .00       |
|             | Occurrences of maladaptive behavior | 14       | 46  | 463  | 257.79   | 98.67     |
| 2015        | In-school suspensions               | 59       | .0  | 23.8 | 6.01     | 8.03      |
|             | out-of-school suspensions           | 59       | .7  | 19.6 | 7.43     | 5.33      |
|             | Expulsions                          | 59       | .0  | .1   | .00      | .01       |
|             | Occurrences of maladaptive behavior | 59       | 12  | 590  | 149.51   | 138.67    |
| 2016        | In-school suspensions               | 58       | .0  | 28.0 | 6.56     | 9.12      |
|             | out-of-school suspensions           | 58       | .3  | 23.7 | 7.92     | 6.18      |
|             | Expulsions                          | 58       | .0  | .1   | .00      | .02       |
|             | Occurrences of maladaptive behavior | 58       | 10  | 690  | 158.66   | 168.99    |
| 2017        | In-school suspensions               | 60       | .0  | 28.6 | 5.72     | 7.98      |
|             | out-of-school suspensions           | 60       | .8  | 22.3 | 7.66     | 5.81      |
|             | Expulsions                          | 60       | .0  | .0   | .00      | .00       |
|             | Occurrences of maladaptive behavior | 60       | 11  | 685  | 149.87   | 159.11    |
| 2018        | In-school suspensions               | 58       | .0  | 27.4 | 5.13     | 7.45      |
|             | out-of-school suspensions           | 58       | .4  | 17.7 | 6.12     | 4.52      |
|             | Expulsions                          | 58       | .0  | .1   | .01      | .02       |
|             | Occurrences of maladaptive behavior | 58       | 12  | 609  | 124.41   | 125.64    |
| 2019        | In-school suspensions               | 56       | .0  | 25.1 | 4.84     | 6.76      |
|             | out-of-school suspensions           | 56       | .9  | 16.1 | 6.54     | 4.63      |
|             | Expulsions                          | 56       | .0  | .1   | .01      | .03       |
|             | Occurrences of maladaptive behavior | 56       | 10  | 398  | 118.55   | 103.60    |

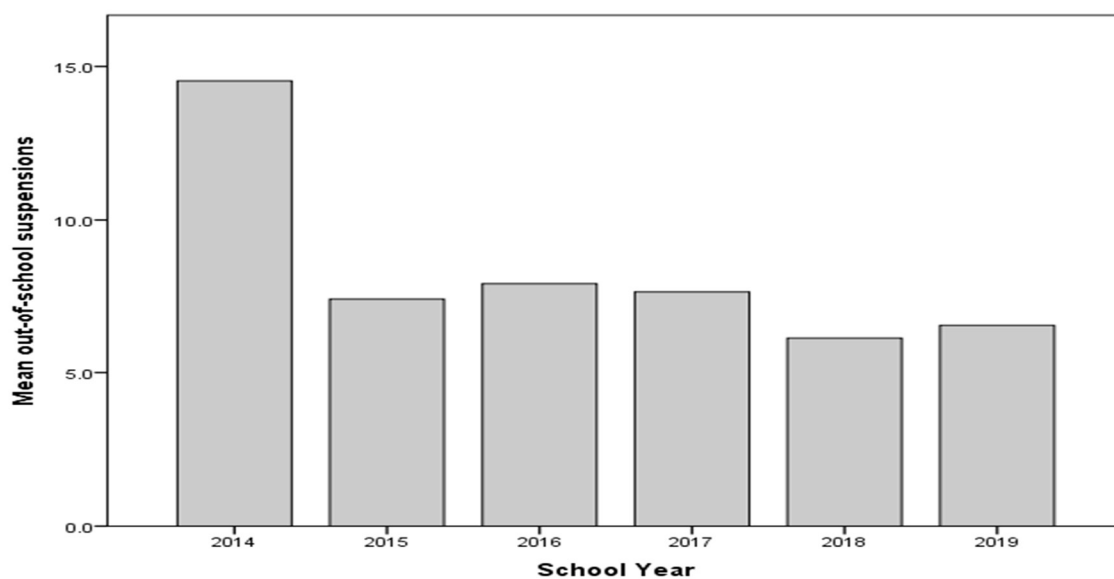
*Note.* From GOSA K-12 Student Discipline Dashboard public website.

In 2014, in-school suspensions ( $M = 19.66$ ,  $SD = 6.55$ ), out-school suspensions ( $M = 14.53$ ,  $SD = 6.27$ ), and maladaptive behaviors ( $M = 257.79$ ,  $SD = 98.67$ ) were the greatest compared to other years. The number of expulsions were greatest in 2018 ( $M = 0.01\%$ ,  $SD = 0.02\%$ ) and 2019 ( $M = 0.01$ ,  $SD = 0.03\%$ ). Expulsions in school years 2014 ( $M = 0.00\%$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ), 2015 ( $M = 0.00\%$ ,  $SD = 0.01\%$ ), 2016 ( $M = 0.00$ ,  $SD = 0.02\%$ ), and 2017 ( $M = 0.00\%$ ,  $SD = 0.00\%$ ) were low.

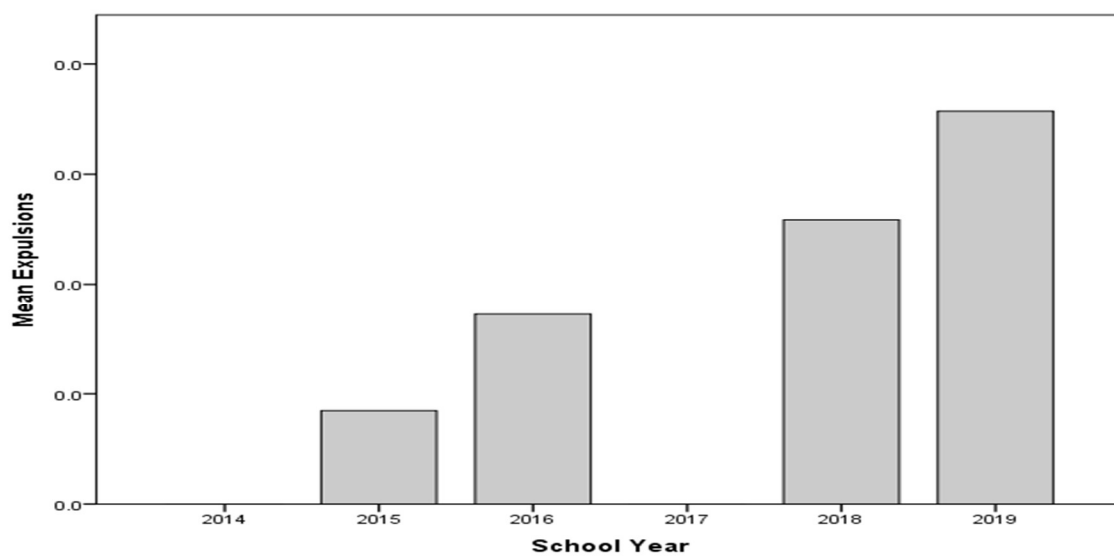
Figures 1 through 4 depict bar charts representing the percentages of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. There seems to be an overall decrease in suspensions and maladaptive behaviors from 2014 to 2019. Expulsions, however, increased from 2014 to 2019.



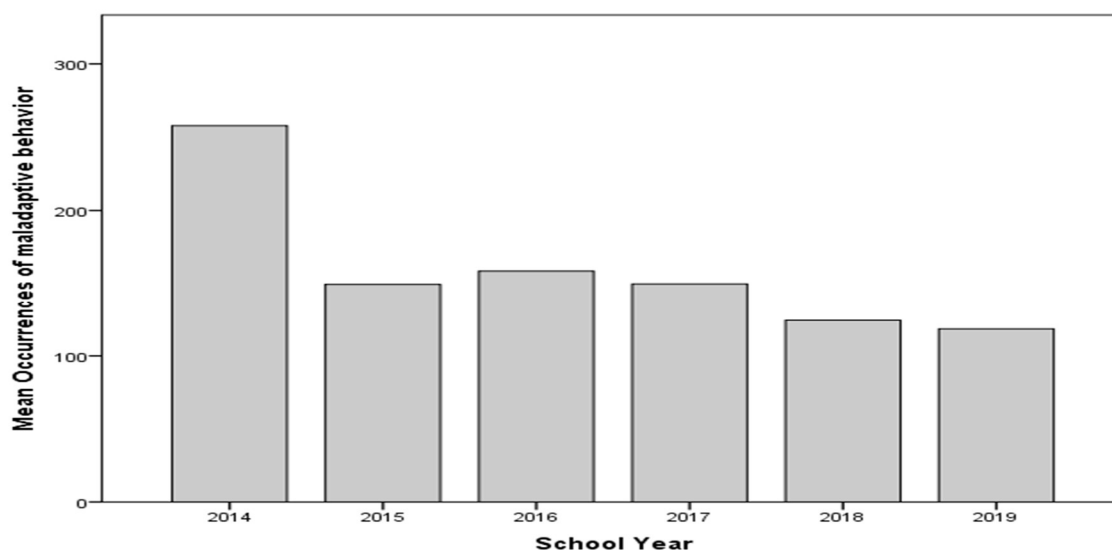
*Figure 1.* Bar graph representing mean in-school suspension percentages from 2014 to 2019.



*Figure 2.* Bar graph representing mean out-of-school suspension percentages from 2014 to 2019.



*Figure 3.* Bar graph representing mean expulsion percentages from 2014 to 2019.



*Figure 4.* Bar graph representing mean maladaptive behavior percentages from 2014 to 2019.

What follows now is a discussion of the results of the analysis based on each research question. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in order to determine the effectiveness of RJ implementation. Specifically, descriptive statistics of the number of juvenile delinquent arrests and felonies pre- and post-RJ implementation were compared. Inferential statistics were generated in order to determine if the change in the number of suspensions, expulsions, and maladaptive behaviors significantly differed annually.

## Results

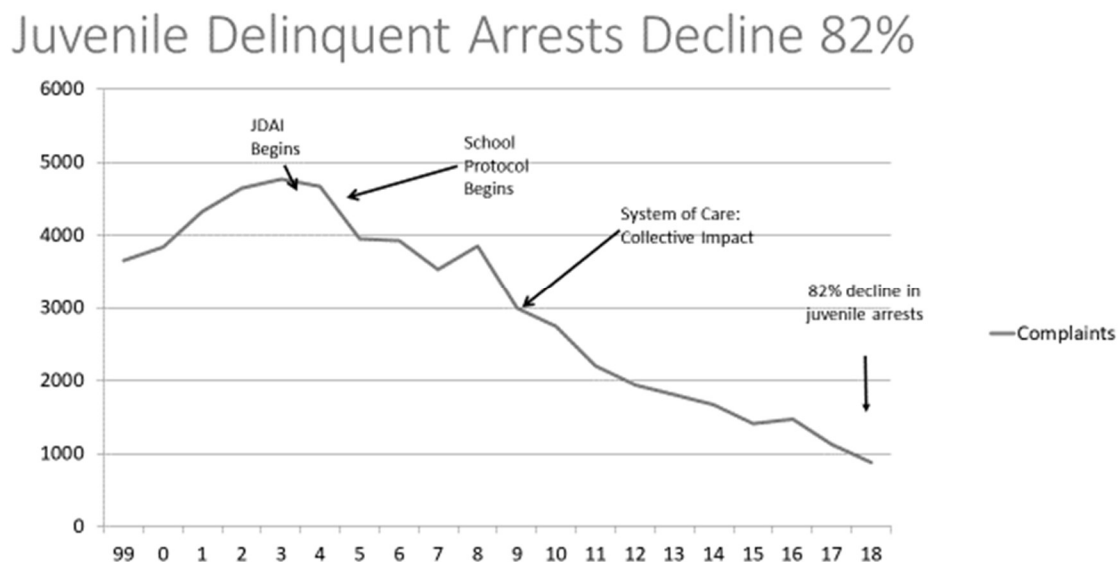
RJ is a method for using participatory learning and decision-making for realigning delinquent behaviors with more adaptive behaviors to promote effective communication, positive socialization, accountability, and the safety of students and staff (Wachtel, 2013). This response method deters premature referral of nonviolent students to the juvenile courts, thus reducing the probability of future involvement in the adult prison



system (Cobb, 2009). RJ is a process of allowing primary stakeholders, including victims, offenders, schools, and communities, to determine how to repair the harm caused by the offensive behavior (Wachtel, 2013).

Clayton County implemented the RJ model in 2003 with the Clayton County School-Justice Partnership created by Judge Steven Teske. Teske began to realize the effect zero tolerance policies had on school campuses. Judge Teske used a model of judicial leadership as the method for addressing the problem. Judge Teske chose to convene a collaboration program with various stakeholders with a single goal-to reduce the arrests at school. In cooperation, the team worked to frame the problem and to find solutions. Judge Teske's research and the collaboration with Clayton County have been known informally as the "Teske Model" or the "Clayton County Model."

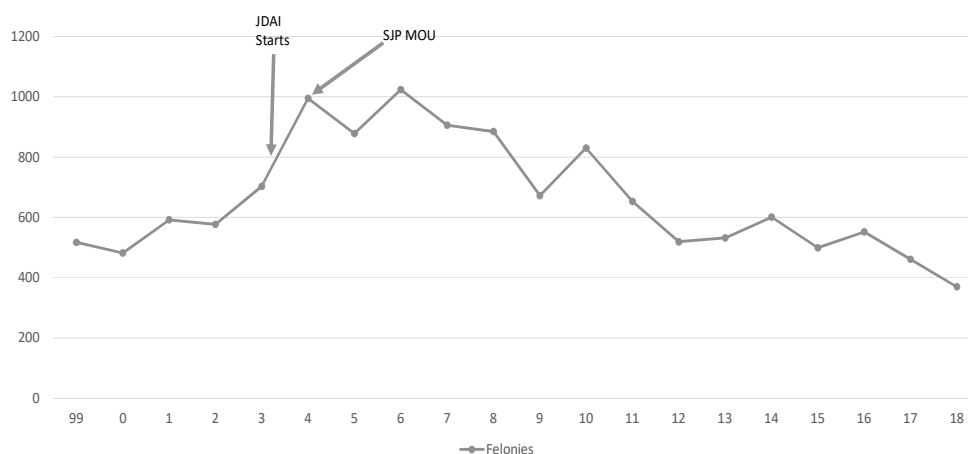
Figure 5 depicts the number of juvenile delinquent arrests from 1999 to 2018. In 1999, the total number of juvenile arrests was approximately 3600. The number of arrests steadily increased to a maximum of 4700 arrests in 2003. At this time point, RJ was implemented via the Clayton County Model. After RJ implementation, the number of juvenile delinquent arrests declined sharply from 2013 to 2018, resulting in an approximate decline of 82%.



*Figure 5.* Juvenile delinquent arrests since 1999. From the Juvenile Court of Clayton County, Georgia. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 6 depicts the number of felonies from 1999 to 2018. In 1999, the total number of felonies was approximately 500. The number of felonies steadily increased to a maximum of 1000 in 2003. At this time point, RJ was implemented via the School Justice Partnership Memorandum of Understanding (SJP MOU). Memorandum of understanding (MOU) established guidelines for addressing student misconduct without court or law enforcement involvement. After RJ implementation, the number of felonies declined sharply from 2006 to 2018, resulting in an approximate decline of 64%.

## Felonies Decline 64% since 2006



*Figure 6.* Felony arrests since 1999. From the Juvenile Court of Clayton County, Georgia. Reprinted with permission.

The research questions in this study address the changes in the number of suspensions, expulsions, and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors of middle school students after the implementation of RJ. Additional analysis was conducted in order to determine if the number of juvenile delinquent arrests and felonies significantly changed between pre-RJ implementation (before 2004) and post implementation (after 2004). Previously, it was demonstrated that, after the implementation of such RJ programs such as the Clayton County Model and SJP MOU, the number of juvenile arrests and felonies decreased after 2003. The following research questions will now assess whether this overall decrease is also consistent with a decrease in the number of in-school/out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and maladaptive behaviors of middle school students from 2014 through 2019.

Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) was employed in order to address the research questions. The GEE procedure in SPSS extends the generalized linear model to allow for analysis of repeated measurements or other correlated observations, such as clustered data. The interpretation is similar to multiple regression where the dependent variable is attempted to be predicted by multiple independent variables. There is no normality assumption in GEE. In this study, the dependent variables were in-school/out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and maladaptive behaviors of middle school students. The independent variable was RJ at time point (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019) and school type (charter/non-charter).

### **Hypothesis Testing for Research Question 1:**

GEE was employed to address this first research question and hypotheses:

RQ1: Is there a significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_01$ : There is no significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_{a1}$ : There is a significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

The overall effect of school year was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 78.589, p < .001$ . Charter school was not significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.016, p = .082$ . Table 4 depicts this information.

Table 4

*GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ1*

| Source      | Type III        |    |       |
|-------------|-----------------|----|-------|
|             | Wald Chi-Square | df | Sig.  |
| (Intercept) | 57.000          | 1  | <.001 |
| School year | 78.589          | 5  | <.001 |
| Charter     | 3.016           | 1  | .082  |

*Note.* Dependent variable: In-school suspensions.

Model: (Intercept), school year, charter.

Compared with 2019, the 2014 school year had a significantly greater number of number of in-school suspensions,  $B = 14.976$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 69.238$ ,  $p < .001$ . In other words, there was a significant overall decrease from 2014 to 2019. This information is provided in Table 5.

Table 5

*GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ1*

| Parameter   | B      | Std. Error | 95% Wald Confidence Interval |        | Hypothesis Test |    |       |
|-------------|--------|------------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|----|-------|
|             |        |            | Lower                        | Upper  | Wald Chi-Square | df | Sig.  |
| (Intercept) | 2.009  | 1.8079     | -1.534                       | 5.553  | 1.235           | 1  | .266  |
| 2014        | 14.976 | 1.7997     | 11.448                       | 18.503 | 69.238          | 1  | <.001 |
| 2015        | 1.224  | 1.3699     | -1.461                       | 3.909  | .798            | 1  | .372  |
| 2016        | 1.767  | 1.4871     | -1.147                       | 4.682  | 1.412           | 1  | .235  |
| 2017        | .930   | 1.3614     | -1.738                       | 3.599  | .467            | 1  | .494  |
| 2018        | .297   | 1.3189     | -2.288                       | 2.882  | .051            | 1  | .822  |
| 2019        | 0*     | .          | .                            | .      | .               | .  | .     |
| Charter     | 2.878  | 1.6570     | -.370                        | 6.126  | 3.016           | 1  | .082  |
| Non-Charter | 0*     | .          | .                            | .      | .               | .  | .     |
| (Scale)     | 61.757 |            |                              |        |                 |    |       |

\*Reference category

### Hypothesis Testing for Research Question 2:

GEE was employed in order to address this second research question and hypotheses:

RQ2: Is there a significant decrease of out of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_02$ : There is no significant decrease of out-of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_{a2}$ : There is a significant decrease of out-of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

The overall effect of school year was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 34.936$ .  $p < .001$ . Charter school was also significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 46.238$   $p < .001$ . Table 6 depicts this information.

Table 6

#### *GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ2*

| Source      | Type III        |    |        |
|-------------|-----------------|----|--------|
|             | Wald Chi-Square | df | Sig.   |
| (Intercept) | 124.389         | 1  | < .001 |
| School Year | 34.936          | 5  | < .001 |
| Charter     | 46.238          | 1  | < .001 |

Dependent Variable: Out-of-school suspensions

Model: (Intercept), School Year, Charter

Compared with 2019, the 2014 school year had a significantly greater number of out-of-school suspensions,  $B = 14.976$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 69.238$ ,  $p < .001$ . In other words, there was a significant overall decrease from 2014 to 2019. Additionally, compared to charter

schools, non-charter schools have a greater number of out-of-school suspensions,  $B =$

6.111,  $\chi^2(1) = 46.238, p < .001$ . This information is provided in Table 7.

Table 7

*GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ2*

| Parameter   | B              | Std. Error | 95% Wald Confidence Interval |        | Hypothesis Test |    |       |
|-------------|----------------|------------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|----|-------|
|             |                |            | Lower                        | Upper  | Wald Chi-Square | df | Sig.  |
| (Intercept) | .536           | 1.0356     | -1.494                       | 2.565  | .267            | 1  | .605  |
| 2014        | 8.318          | 1.5495     | 5.282                        | 11.355 | 28.822          | 1  | <.001 |
| 2015        | .986           | .9100      | -.798                        | 2.769  | 1.174           | 1  | .279  |
| 2016        | 1.488          | .9988      | -.469                        | 3.446  | 2.220           | 1  | .136  |
| 2017        | 1.217          | .9541      | -.653                        | 3.087  | 1.627           | 1  | .202  |
| 2018        | -.421          | .8455      | -2.078                       | 1.237  | .247            | 1  | .619  |
| 2019        | 0 <sup>a</sup> | .          | .                            | .      | .               | .  | .     |
| Charter     | 6.111          | .8987      | 4.350                        | 7.873  | 46.238          | 1  | <.001 |
| Non-Charter | 0 <sup>a</sup> | .          | .                            | .      | .               | .  | .     |
| (Scale)     | 28.018         |            |                              |        |                 |    |       |

\*Reference category

**Hypothesis Testing for Research Question 3:**

GEE was employed to address this third research question and hypotheses:

RQ3: Is there a significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_{03}$ : There is no significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_{a3}$ : There is a significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

The overall effect of school year was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 10.550$ ,  $p = .061$ . Charter school was significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.050$ ,  $p = .025$ . Table 8 depicts this information.

Table 8

*GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ3*

| Source      | Type III        |    |      |
|-------------|-----------------|----|------|
|             | Wald Chi-Square | df | Sig. |
| (Intercept) | 6.492           | 1  | .011 |
| School Year | 10.550          | 5  | .061 |
| Charter     | 5.050           | 1  | .025 |

Dependent Variable: Expulsions  
Model: (Intercept), School Year, Charter

Compared to charter schools, noncharter schools have a greater number of expulsions,  $B = .003$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.050$ ,  $p = .015$ . This information is provided in Table 9.

Table 9

*GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ3*

| Parameter   | B     | Std. Error | 95% Wald Confidence Interval |       | Hypothesis Test |    |      |
|-------------|-------|------------|------------------------------|-------|-----------------|----|------|
|             |       |            | Lower                        | Upper | Wald Chi-Square | df | Sig. |
| (Intercept) | .005  | .0032      | -.002                        | .011  | 1.998           | 1  | .157 |
| 2014        | -.007 | .0034      | -.014                        | .000  | 4.184           | 1  | .041 |
| 2015        | -.005 | .0038      | -.013                        | .002  | 1.997           | 1  | .158 |
| 2016        | -.004 | .0042      | -.012                        | .005  | .759            | 1  | .384 |
| 2017        | -.007 | .0034      | -.014                        | .000  | 4.276           | 1  | .039 |
| 2018        | -.002 | .0045      | -.011                        | .007  | .192            | 1  | .661 |
| 2019        | 0*    | .          | .                            | .     | .               | .  | .    |
| Charter     | .003  | .0012      | .000                         | .005  | 5.050           | 1  | .025 |
| Non-Charter | 0*    | .          | .                            | .     | .               | .  | .    |
| (Scale)     | .000  |            |                              |       |                 |    |      |

\*Reference category



### Hypothesis Testing for Research Question 4:

GEE was employed to address this fourth research question and hypotheses:

RQ4: Is there a significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

$H_{04}$ : There is no significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

$H_{a4}$ : There is a significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations.

The overall effect of school year was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 36.636, p < .001$ . Charter school was also significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 49.023, p < .001$ . Table 10 depicts this information.

Table 10

#### *GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ4*

| Source      | Type III        |    |        |
|-------------|-----------------|----|--------|
|             | Wald Chi-Square | df | Sig.   |
| (Intercept) | 151.646         | 1  | < .001 |
| School Year | 36.636          | 5  | < .001 |
| Charter     | 49.023          | 1  | < .001 |

Dependent Variable: Expulsions

Model: (Intercept), School Year, Charter

Compared with 2019, the 2014 school year had a significantly greater number of occurrences of maladaptive behaviors,  $B = 145.420$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 33.062$ ,  $p < .001$ . In other words, there was a significant overall decrease from 2014 to 2019. Additionally, compared to charter schools, non-charter schools have a greater number occurrences of maladaptive behaviors,  $B = 115.513$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 49.023$ ,  $p < .001$ . This information is provided in Table 11.

Table 11

*GEE Tests of Model Effects for RQ4*

| Parameter   | B         | Std. Error | 95% Wald Confidence Interval |         | Hypothesis Test |    |      |
|-------------|-----------|------------|------------------------------|---------|-----------------|----|------|
|             |           |            | Lower                        | Upper   | Wald Chi-Square | df | Sig. |
| (Intercept) | 5.103     | 20.2039    | -34.496                      | 44.702  | .064            | 1  | .801 |
| 2014        | 145.420   | 25.2906    | 95.852                       | 194.989 | 33.062          | 1  | .000 |
| 2015        | 32.808    | 22.3749    | -11.046                      | 76.662  | 2.150           | 1  | .143 |
| 2016        | 42.022    | 25.7566    | -8.460                       | 92.504  | 2.662           | 1  | .103 |
| 2017        | 33.101    | 24.4972    | -14.913                      | 81.114  | 1.826           | 1  | .177 |
| 2018        | 5.789     | 21.2443    | -35.849                      | 47.427  | .074            | 1  | .785 |
| 2019        | 0*        | .          | .                            | .       | .               | .  | .    |
| Charter     | 115.513   | 16.4979    | 83.178                       | 147.848 | 49.023          | 1  | .000 |
| Non-Charter | 0*        | .          | .                            | .       | .               | .  | .    |
| (Scale)     | 19253.374 |            |                              |         |                 |    |      |

\*Reference category

**Supplementary Analysis**

Utilizing the data as depicted in Figure 5 (Juvenile delinquent arrests since 1999), an independent *t*-test was conducted in order to determine if the mean number of juvenile delinquent arrests were significantly different between pre- and post-RJ implementation. The number of juvenile delinquent arrests since 1999 ranged from 875.00 to 4774.00 (*M*

= 2969.75,  $SD = 1304.11$ ). Skewness and kurtosis values were within -3 to +3 indicating that the data were approximately normally distributed, which is one of the assumptions of the independent  $t$  test. Table 12 depicts this information.

Table 12

*Juvenile Delinquent Arrests Descriptive Statistics*

| $N$ | Min    | Max     | $M$     | $SD$    | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|-----|--------|---------|---------|---------|----------|----------|
| 20  | 875.00 | 4774.00 | 2969.75 | 1304.11 | -.168    | -1.496   |

Notably, another assumption of the independent samples  $t$ -test is that there are no outliers in the data. Standardized scores ranged from -1.61 to 1.38, well within the predefined -2 to +2 threshold, thus indicating the absence of outliers in the data. The mean number of juvenile delinquent arrests prior to RJ implementation ( $M = 4248.80$ ,  $SD = 487.78$ ) was greater than the mean after implementation ( $M = 2543.40$ ,  $SD = 312.10$ ).

Table 13 depicts this information.

Table 13

*Juvenile Delinquent Arrests Pre- and Post-RJ Implementation*

|                        | $N$ | $M$     | $SD$    | $SE$   |
|------------------------|-----|---------|---------|--------|
| Pre-RJ Implementation  | 5   | 4248.80 | 487.78  | 218.14 |
| Post-RJ Implementation | 15  | 2543.40 | 1208.75 | 312.10 |

Table 14 depicts the results of the independent  $t$ -test. Due to a significant result obtained from the Levene's test for the equality of variances,  $F = 7.020$ ,  $p = .016$ ), the Welch's  $t$ -test was utilized in place of the ordinary  $t$ -testing procedures. There was a

significant mean difference in the number of juvenile delinquent arrests between pre- and post-RJ implementation,  $M_{diff} = 1705.40$ ,  $t(16.902) = 4.479$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Table 14

*Independent Samples Test*

| Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |          |          |           |          | t-test for Equality of Means |               |   |         |
|---|----------|----------|-----------|----------|------------------------------|---------------|---|---------|
| <i>F</i>                                | <i>p</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | Mean Difference              | SE Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |         |
|   |          |          |           |          |                              |               | Lower                                     | Upper   |
| 7.020                                   | .016     | 4.479    | 16.902    | .000     | 1705.40                      | 380.78        | 901.67                                    | 2509.13 |

Utilizing the data as depicted in Figure 6 (Felony arrests since 1999), an independent *t*-test was conducted in order to determine if the mean number of felony arrests were significantly different between pre- and post-RJ implementation. The number of felony arrests since 1999 ranged from 370.00 to 1024.00 ( $M = 662.40$ ,  $SD = 191.79$ ). Skewness and kurtosis values were within -3 to +3 indicating that the data were approximately normally distributed, which is one of the assumptions of the independent *t*-test. Table 15 depicts this information.

Table 15

*Felony Arrests Descriptive Statistics*

| <i>N</i> | <i>Min</i> | <i>Max</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|----------|------------|------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| 20       | 370.00     | 1024.00    | 662.40   | 191.79    | .582     | -.849    |

Again, the absence of outlier assumption for an independent samples  $t$ -test was checked by examining the standardized values of the observations for felony arrests. Standardized scores ranged from -1.52 to 1.89, well within the -2 to +2 threshold, thus indicating the absence of outliers. The mean number of felony arrests prior to RJ implementation ( $M = 574.20$ ,  $SD = 84.69$ ) was less than the mean after implementation ( $M = 691.80$ ,  $SD = 210.16$ ). Table 16 depicts this information.

Table 16

*Felony Arrests Pre- and Post-RJ Implementation*

|                        | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>SE</i> |
|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Pre-RJ Implementation  | 5        | 574.20   | 84.69     | 37.87     |
| Post-RJ Implementation | 15       | 691.80   | 210.16    | 54.26     |

Table 17 depicts the results of the independent samples  $t$ -test. Due to a significant result obtained from the Levene's test for the equality of variances, ( $F = 7.754$ ,  $p = .012$ ), the Welch's  $t$ -test was again utilized. There was no significant mean difference in the number of felony arrests between pre- and post-RJ implementation,  $M_{diff} = 117.60$ ,  $t(16.914) = -1.777$ ,  $p = .094$ .

Table 17

*Independent Samples Test*

| Levene's Test<br>for Equality<br>of Variances |          |          |           | $t$ -test for Equality of Means |                    |                          |   |
|---|----------|----------|-----------|---------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <i>F</i>                                      | <i>P</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>P</i>                        | Mean<br>Difference | Std. Error<br>Difference | 95% Confidence<br>Interval of the<br>Difference |

|       |      |        |        |      |         |       | Lower   | Upper |
|-------|------|--------|--------|------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| 7.754 | .012 | -1.777 | 16.914 | .094 | -117.60 | 66.17 | -257.26 | 22.07 |

### Summary

The purpose of this quantitative study was to evaluate the effectiveness of RJ in decreasing the number juvenile delinquent behaviors such as juvenile arrests, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. Historical data regarding juvenile delinquency arrests as well as felonies were gathered from 1999 to 2019. After the implementation of RJ programs in 2003, such as the Clayton County Model and SJP MOU, there was a sharp decline in the number of juvenile arrests and felonies. In order to assess if the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors were reduced, the following research questions were addressed by employing GEE:

RQ1: Is there a significant decrease of in-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

RQ2: Is there a significant decrease of out of-school suspensions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

RQ3: Is there a significant decrease of expulsions for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

RQ4: Is there a significant decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors for middle school students after implementing RJ practices for nonviolent rules violations?

With the exception of expulsions (RQ3), there were overall significant reductions from 2014 to 2019 in the number of in-school suspensions (RQ1), out of-school suspensions (RQ2), and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors (RQ4) for middle school students. Additionally, compared to charter schools, non-charter schools had a greater number of suspensions and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. The number of expulsions was not found to be significantly different.

Supplemental analysis utilizing independent samples *t*-tests was conducted in order to determine whether there were significant mean differences in the number of juvenile delinquent arrests and felonies between pre- and post-RJ implementation. The number of juvenile delinquent arrests was significantly reduced after the implementation of RJ. However, there were no significant differences in the number of felony arrests.

What follows in Chapter 5 is a discussion as to how the results of this study are interpreted in the context of the theoretical framework. Any limitations of the results of the study will be provided. Additionally, recommendations for future research will be discussed.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

For decades, the school and juvenile detention systems in the United States and abroad have used punitive disciplinary practices such as suspension, expulsion, detention, and jail sentences to address adolescent misbehavior (Lewis, 2009). Exclusionary practices positioning students in the SPP, using suspensions and expulsions, and perpetuating a cycle of failure are among the negative effects of retributive measures in school settings, which form the basis for this research's case study. The aforementioned practices are considered retributive in that they serve as repayment to society in the case of detention and to act as desertion of society in the cases of suspension or incarceration (Flanders, 2014, p. 328). The use of such practices has been escalated by zero-tolerance practices, touted by both juvenile justice and educational systems. Nevertheless, there is the existence of little evidence supporting the idea of these retributive practices reducing the number of fights, disruptions, and other violent misbehaviors within schools (Lewis, 2009). For instance, maladaptive behaviors in some students can be disruptive to a school's learning environment, making it difficult for teachers to function effectively and affect the academic success of other students (Ullman, 2016). Therefore, these acts are believed to be solved through the implementation of restorative practices and programs as an alternative. As an alternate response approach to retributive justice, RJ deters premature referral of nonviolent students to the juvenile courts, thus reducing the probability of future involvement in the adult prison system (Cobb, 2009).

Chapter 1 of this research is a presentation of the conceptual framework, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, and the



definition of terms. In the research study, middle schools in Clayton County, are used as a case study of the implementation of RJ practice programs in Georgia.

Clayton County implemented the RJ model in 2003 with the Clayton County School-Justice Partnership created by Judge Steven Teske. Teske's realization of the effects zero-tolerance policies had on school campuses is what prompted him to take action. Judge Teske used a model of judicial leadership as the method for addressing the problem. Judge Teske chose to convene a collaboration program with various stakeholders with a single goal, to reduce the arrests at school. The data used in this research was collected from the Clayton County juvenile court and school district and formed the basis of various research questions that took the study to the end. The background and problem statement sections provided historical context regarding behavior management programs that led to the increased need for the use of RJ to remediate the SPP aspect of the education system and improve outcomes for all students (Cobb, 2009; Latimer et al., 2005). The chapter discusses the research questions, research methodology, target population, and variables. Following this section are discussions of the theoretical and conceptual framework, the nature of the study, operational definitions, assumptions, scope, and delimitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the proposed study, the significance of the study, and a summary of the chapter

In Chapter 2, I explored a review of related literature that evaluated the effectiveness of RJ models and practices in juvenile justice programs and schools within Clayton county and abroad. In Chapter 3, I described the research and data collection

methods used in this study. Results of the hypothesis testing were discussed in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 begins with a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings related to the literature, and concludes with implications, limitations, and recommendations for future studies.

### **Findings Related to the Literature**

A review of current, relevant literature has shown that reforms of discipline are widely varied and implemented by program-based interventions or policy changes at differing levels. Although some reforms are at the state or district level, others are witnessed at the school level by targeting individuals or groups of students (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Schools that have supportive leadership, school wide behavior management, and effective academic instruction minimize risks for the occurrence of delinquency and maladaptive behaviors (Christle et al., 2005). RJ is an example of a targeted reform program. As a behavior management technique, RJ has been witnessed to be promoting desirable conditions for successful academic achievements (Christle et al., 2005).

In reviewing the related literature, advocates of RJ reveal how its introduction as an alternative approach to the traditional crime and punishment process, the retributive justice system, has changed the society, especially among the world of the school-going children and the youth in general. As a result, school administrators have put up standardized policies in addressing the student behaviors that negatively affect the learning environment. In response to increasing numbers and severities of undesirable

behaviors, school discipline turned to a zero-tolerance policy in most states (Wald & Losen, 2003)

In the elaboration of RJ, a discussion of zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline, the philosophy of RJ, current findings from research done at schools implementing restorative approaches, and an articulation of the need and value of this study has been given in detail in the literature review. In the literature review, a deep description of the field of RJ is given, pointing to the need, importance, and value of this study.

Studies reviewed had similar research goals as the case study for this research. Addressing the causes of SPP, researchers stated the effects the process had on students, such as being pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system, often in racially disproportionate numbers (Cobb, 2009). The key elements fueling this process was recorded as exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, that led to academic failure and increased dropout rates (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Schiff, 2013). The review pointed out that adult prisons were filled with individuals who had traveled through the juvenile justice system into the adult criminal justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). Approximately 68% of state prison inmates in 1997 had not completed high school, and 75% of inmates under age 18 years sentenced to adult prisons had not passed the 10th grade (Wald & Losen, 2003). Rampey et al. (2016) indicated that 30% of the 1,547 individuals who comprised the sample of federal, state, and private prison inmates within the United States had less than a high school education compared to only 14% in U.S. households. Individuals who are removed from the education system

are more likely to continue maladaptive behaviors, including dropping out of school and criminal violations of societal expectations and norms, according to the author.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

This current research study sought to address the following research question: Has the implementation of RJ practices at the middle school level played a role in decreasing the number of suspensions for students? The results show that RJ had a significant effect on the declining suspensions for students, proving the hypothesis likely to be correct. By performing additional analysis, we were capable of determining if the number of juvenile delinquent arrests and felonies significantly changed between pre-RJ implementation (before 2004) and post implementation (after 2004). According to the study conducted previously, it was demonstrated that, after the implementation of such RJ programs such as the Clayton County Model and SJP MOU, the number of juvenile arrests and felonies decreased after 2003. Employing both descriptive and inferential statistics was aimed at determining the effectiveness of RJ implementation in the case study.

Overall significant reductions from 2014 to 2019 in the number of in-school suspensions (RQ1), was recorded except with expulsions (RQ 3). Also, it was revealed that there were out-of-school suspensions (RQ2), and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors (RQ4) for middle school students. Additionally, compared with charter schools, noncharter schools had a higher number of suspensions and occurrences of maladaptive behaviors. The number of expulsions was not found to be significantly different.

Supplemental analysis utilizing independent samples *t*-tests was conducted to determine whether there were significant mean differences in the number of juvenile delinquent arrests and felonies between pre-and post-RJ implementation. The number of juvenile delinquent arrests was significantly reduced after the implementation of RJ. However, there were no significant differences in the number of felony arrests. Although this study focuses on quantitative calculations, it should be taken into consideration with previous qualitative research, including participant narratives regarding RJ in school settings.

The current study helps by providing a better understanding of the effect of RJ in the place of exclusionary discipline practices regarding the effectiveness of decreasing repetitive maladaptive behaviors, specifically nonviolent rules violations. The results could provide policymakers, district leaders, school boards, and school administrators an overview of the effectiveness of RJ as a collaborative behavior management program in order to minimize the effect of law enforcement and the juvenile court system in the handling of student misbehavior, specifically in the middle school environment.

It is not fully understood to what extent RJ may improve outcomes for students involved in nonviolent middle school rules violations. Many schools, communities, and programs are using components of RJ; however, implementation and effectiveness have not been researched in detail using sufficient scientific methods to establish replicable examples. The current literature on RJ has primarily focused on the adult criminal justice system and how RJ has been beneficial for victim satisfaction and affected offender recidivism (Latimer et al., 2005).

Although restorative practice principles are being taught in some schools, juvenile justice systems, and community programs, the essential components, have not always been used effectively (Frias-Armentia et al., 2018). Support for RJ programs is growing, but there is still a lack of internally valid research to solely attribute positive educational outcomes to the implementation of RJ (Fronius et al., 2019). Literature is absent concerning the efficacy of RJ in response to nonviolent school rules violations in the middle school environment.

Literature has documented that those students who are excluded from the school community experience have lower academic achievement, increased negative attitudes, and greater dropout rates (Gonzalez, 2012, p. 4). However, there is limited research regarding the relationship between school-wide RJ practices and exclusionary practices, such as suspensions, using quantitative methods. In addition, the affect that RJ has in relation to a student's race and ethnicity, when examining suspensions across years, has not been identified in previous literature.

This study provides evidence that the introduction of RJ at the middle school level has played a significant role in the declining suspension rates for students across five school years. Further examination of restorative practices should take both individual narratives and measurable data into consideration.

### **Limitation of the Study**

The use of archival data and nonexperimental design exposed this research study to the limitation of the amount and types of data that were available, based on what was originally collected. The comparative design can only conclude a statistically significant

relationship, rather than a cause and effect association. Still, there is an absence of recent and comprehensive evaluations of restorative programs in school settings that can provide an opportunity for researchers to focus on the effect of restorative programs, which mark a limitation to this study (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

There is limited scientific literature examining the effects of RJ on victim satisfaction, offender accountability, school environment, and community involvement (Hurley et al., 2015), which this study also found as a limitation. Research about RJ is ongoing in several areas; however, valid population-specific analysis is needed to establish the effectiveness of restorative practices at the middle school level as an alternative to punitive and exclusionary methods and to decrease maladaptive behavior rates.

Last, the findings do not guarantee that RJ practices will be successful when introduced to other schools outside Clayton County, or elsewhere. Instead, the findings demonstrate that a school-wide RJ approach has significantly decreased student suspensions, subsequently creating a more inclusive school community. The study provides evidence of success for RJ at the middle school level but does not provide a uniform guideline for RJ to be implemented in schools elsewhere.

### **Recommendations**

A clear school structure, transparent policies, and perceived equality can decrease the need for harsh punitive responses to nonviolent behaviors. According to suggestions by Christle et al. (2005) on supportive leadership, dedicated and collegial staff, school-wide behavior management, and effective academic instruction, this study also supports

that these actions are capable of minimizing risks for youth delinquency. Cobb (2009) proposed that there is a need to shift away from one-size-fits-all school discipline tactics and implement procedural protections for children otherwise faced with referral to the court system.

The study believes that these actions would provide safeguards against the premature referral of nonviolent students to the juvenile courts and also reduce the probability of their future exposure to the adult criminal justice system. This study also supports the shifting away from the zero-tolerance policy of schools and replacing it with RJ as an alternative to punitive actions as equally suggested by Schiff (2013). In the same breadth, Pereda Beltrán (2015) determined that RJ can benefit children by supporting the participation of youths in the system in which the study also strongly supports and recommends. Correspondingly, as per Austin's (2018) recommendation, a cultural shift is warranted addressing the needs of vulnerable youth through increasing access to academic services and resources and promoting opportunities for social change.

Latimer et al. (2005) described recidivism and restitution compliance components of RJ as the most quantifiable measures of the effectiveness of RJ. Compared to nonrestrictive practices, RJ has been found to be effective at increasing victim satisfaction through inclusion in the process, offender satisfaction through nonpunitive alternatives, and restitution compliance for accountability, while decreasing recidivism of offenders. Schools also need to manage maladaptive behaviors to provide successful learning environments for all students. Realigning all stakeholders towards establishing a common goal may help to restore relationships and keep juveniles in the community.



Teachers and students are advised to be in partnership with each other for authentic learning to occur. The communication between teachers and students is absolutely critical for this to occur. In the RJ practices observed at Clayton, evidence of this partnership was very strong. The RJ coordinators, SMS, administrators, and teachers were all observed having caring conversations with students throughout the building and in a variety of contexts. Students are asked how they feel and are encouraged to share and work towards making things right with those that were harmed.

### **Implications**

Throughout data analysis, several themes emerged from the students' perspectives of RJ that connect with the theoretical framework. Each student interviewed expressed that RJ was helpful because it was supportive. As Vygotsky (1962) theorized, we are social creatures, and we learn through interacting with others and the world around us. Inherent in the RJ practices observed at Clayton County Schools, is the idea that we can learn with and from each other to repair damaged relationships. RJ addresses the needs of victims, schools, communities, and the roles of the offenders.

RJ contrasts with the legalistic system of rehabilitation or retribution that holds offenders accountable in relation to violations of rules or laws for the purpose of punishment (Latimer et al., 2005; Zehr, 2015). Juvenile justice was modeled on the premise of rehabilitation of youth but did not seem to have a process for teaching adaptive behaviors to restore relationships (Gonzalez, 2012).

A decrease in middle school suspension rates is beneficial to the community for a variety of reasons. When RJ is implemented, there is a focus on including the student in

the school community and repairing relationships, which may be done through circle processes or victim-offender conferencing (Zehr et al., 2015). Through these processes, students learn essential problem-solving skills that may be translated into future school and life events. Race and ethnicity were taken into account when examining the 5-year suspension history report and maladaptive behavior. The findings demonstrated that both the total number of suspensions and also the proportional rate for both students of color and the white students declined from pre-implementation of RJ to post-implementation. These results are significant in that they demonstrate progress towards more equitable and just school environments. By learning how to repair relationships and address harm that was done, it is, therefore, justifiable to claim that students learned how to become responsible members of society. As a result, keeping students actively engaged in the community may have helped prevent them from being pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline.

RJ provides a framework for reducing student suspensions and expulsions stemming from maladaptive behaviors. Restorative programs are more effective responses to criminal behavior than traditional approaches in the areas of victim and offender satisfaction, restitution compliance, and recidivism (Latimer et al., 2005). However, there is an absence of recent and comprehensive evaluations of such programs in school settings that can provide an opportunity for researchers to focus on the effect of restorative programs (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). RJ techniques can provide students with an opportunity to describe their experiences, gain empathy for peers, and take accountability for their actions (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

Engaging in the RJ process will help the offender in assuming accountability with the aid of their family and community. By removing the labels of offender and victim in the transformative stage for nonviolent offenses, the use of RJ is expected to improve school environments and trust within families and communities that schools are effectively providing a safe and fair learning environment, creating a sense of accountability within all students to prepare them to become productive global citizens, and decrease the likelihood of repeat offenses or transition into more serious criminal offenses. A decrease in repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors would lead to a lower rate of exclusionary discipline, and ultimately a lower level of juvenile institutionalization.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The use of RJ has been supported by research both nationally and internationally, not only in some areas of the education system, but also in the juvenile court system. However, the juvenile justice system and education system serve the same youth, and can be used to further punish or to restore these adolescents and children dependent on the use of either punitive or restorative discipline.

The criminal justice and education systems might transform the roles of their professional staff as a means to further foster restoration not only in their individual system, but also in the greater system of the community they serve and affecting the society for positive change. Educators and juvenile justice professionals understand that their end goal of keeping children in school and out of the justice system is the same. For

such goals to be met, collaborative, non-hierarchical communication must take place among all stakeholders.

Professionals must be further educated on the research, theory, and techniques comprising restorative practices, and train staff to become proficient restorative practitioners. These goals can be accomplished with the help of research that provides feedback on such transformations, collaborations, and extended education. It is recommended that future research on discipline policies and practices, either punitive or restorative, discuss the affect such policies and practices have on all racial and ethnic groups to ensure such policies and practices provide equal opportunity to all members of the student population and the society at large.

As the need for alternative measures arise in specific youth contexts and society, such as that of the SPP, school-based RJ programs, often in the form of sentencing circles, have gained increased attention and support over the past several years to combat this trend (Gonzalez, 2012). As RJ programs continue to gain leverage, additional research using rigorous methodological evaluations on school-based RJ programs is warranted.

An extensive body of research has shown that the teacher-student relationship is an important factor in students' engagement, learning, and performance (Klem & Connell, 2004; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Wentzel, 2009).

Further studies might investigate the specific characteristics of RJ in schools that decreases the likelihood of discriminatory discipline practices. Including differentiating change as a result of an increase in teachers' and or administrations' cultural competence

versus a decrease in students' recidivism rates. Future research may examine which restorative practices result in the most significant changes in school communities and positively affect society. In addition, future research could examine the individual components of RJ to provide increased insight into the program's effectiveness

### **Conclusion**

The results of this quantitative research study reveal how adopting a RJ philosophy, and the use of aligned restorative approaches in the classroom, can be an alternative to punitive actions of retributive justice, including how RJ can be used in reducing in and out of school student suspensions and expulsions stemming from maladaptive behaviors. The goal of this research was to study process; specifically, the efficacy of RJ program practices in middle school environments, for the reduction of exclusionary discipline practices and repetitive occurrences of maladaptive behaviors.

Although this study has signified the success of RJ being implemented at middle schools in one community, further research is required on how restorative practices may be maintained in school settings. Viewing RJ as a long-term approach may require further longitudinal studies providing support for the framework in middle school settings. This study evaluated a five-year suspension report, with RJ being introduced in the later years. In order to evaluate its success over longer periods of time, data may need to extend to ten or fifteen years after its implementation. Rather than view RJ as a temporary trend, academic literature should emphasize the staying power of RJ in education, with evidence-based results to support its success.

Therefore, through examining the dataset from Georgia State and the school-wide RJ approach, there has been witnessed significantly decreased use of exclusionary practices and student maladaptive behaviors, subsequently creating a more inclusive school community. This has been evidenced by success for RJ at the middle school level; however, it may not provide a uniform guideline for RJ to be implemented in schools elsewhere.

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